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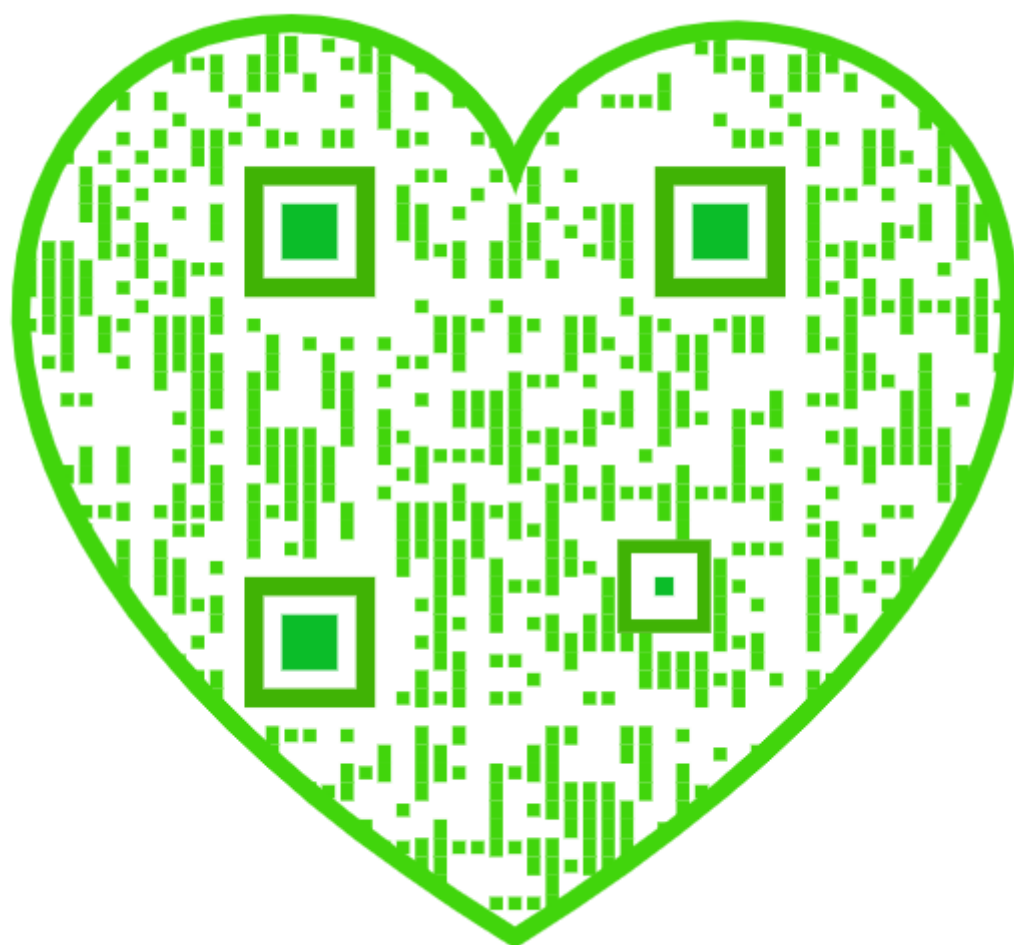
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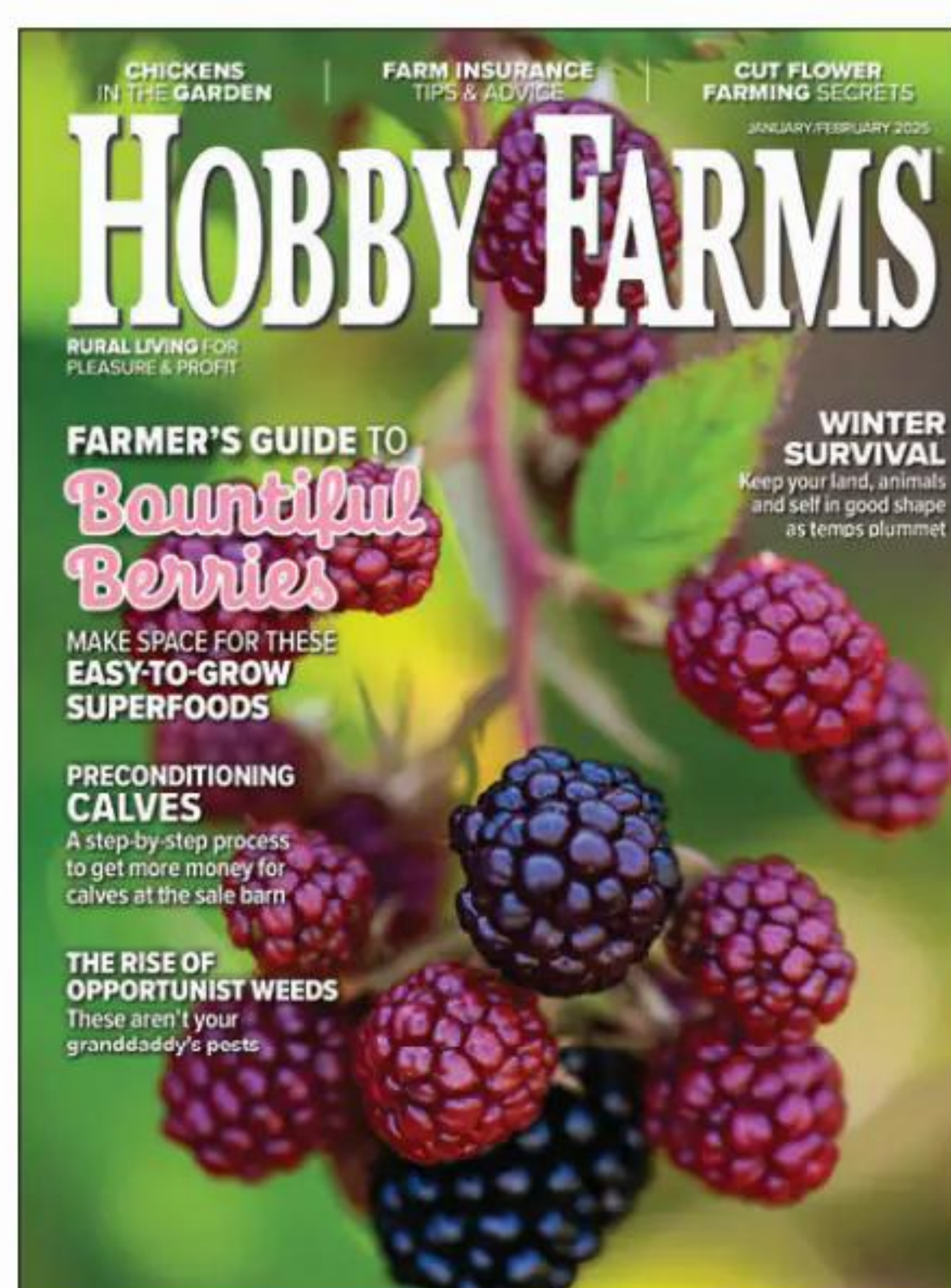
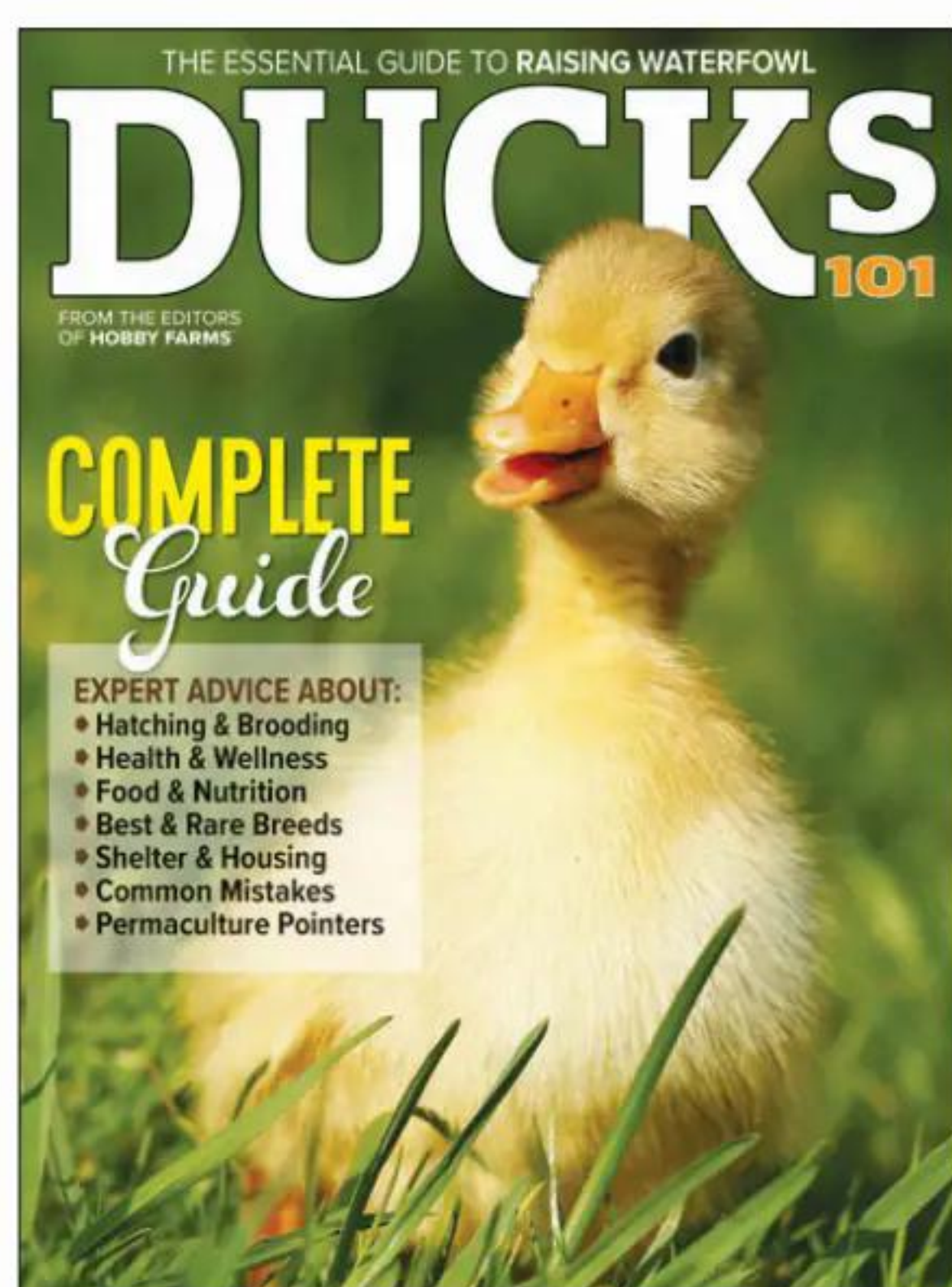
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The Old English Game breed comes in a variety of colors and is most used in show. Hens lay well for a game breed and make nice mothers. Due to its hardiness, vigor and longevity, it's been used to develop a number of chicken breeds.

The Old English Game, arguably the first chicken breed developed in England, directly evolved from birds used for cockfighting before the hobby was outlawed in 1849. Its ancestors are said to predate the British Isle conquest of Julius Caesar around 55 B.C. The breed's popularity rose once poultry shows began to replace cockfighting as a form of competition.

Of all domestic chicken breeds, the Old English Game has the most similarities in appearance to that of wild jungle fowl and has not seen much physical change over the past 1,000 years. The breed was admitted into the American Poultry Association's *Standard of Perfection* in 1928.

Two slightly different types of Old English Games evolved from the original fighting stock: the Oxford, with an upright carriage, and the Carlisle, with a horizontal carriage. The breed has 34 known color varieties, eight of which are recognized by the APA. The close, tight feathers emphasize the breed's small size. It has a single comb with 5 points, and its wattles and earlobes are small and smooth; all are bright red, red or mulberry, depending on the plumage color variety. Shank color varies with plumage. Standard Old English Game cocks weigh 5 pounds and hens weigh 4 pounds; bantam cocks weigh 24 ounces and bantam hens weigh 22 ounces.

The Old English Game is a lively, flighty and noisy chicken breed that doesn't tolerate confinement. Males should be separated early, as chicks will begin to squabble at a young age. The Old English Game breed is currently listed in the Watch category of The Livestock Conservancy's Priority List. 🐔

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Bugs

Beasties, specks, creepy crawlies — whatever you call them, bugs can be found in any yard or garden, especially if you keep chickens. Not a problem, you say? What could be more natural than a happy hen scampering after a hopping cricket or scratching up a tasty beetle? You may have even started your flock with the express purpose of insect control. Not all insects make for tasty snacks, however, and some

can be downright dangerous to your birds. As a poultry-keeper, you'll need to differentiate between the good, the bad and the ugly.

THE BIRDS & THE BUGS

Raising chickens has long been known as an excellent way to curtail the local insect population — “insect” being a colloquial catch-all term that covers noninsect arthropods such as spiders, worms and centipedes.

Chickens will gladly gobble up grasshoppers, hookworms, potato beetles, termites, ticks, slugs, centipedes, spiders and scorpions.



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If it creeps, crawls or flies, your birds will obligingly hunt it down and eat it.

Chickens' omnivorous diet, ravenous appetite and natural curiosity will keep them cheerfully foraging in their run and, if you allow it, on your lawn or in your garden. Free-ranging your chickens will not only keep your flock content but will also significantly diminish the number of insects on your property.

Chickens will gladly gobble up grasshoppers, hookworms, potato beetles, termites, ticks, slugs, centipedes, spiders and scorpions. They'll happily devour the larvae of ants, moths and termites, with a distinct partiality to beetle larvae — lawn grubs and mealworms, aka darkling beetle larvae. (The latter are sold by various companies, if you'd like to buy a treat for your birds.)

There are, of course, instances where you'll find yourself upset at your birds' propensity for inhaling all insects, such as when they chase after butterflies and fireflies, or greedily gulp down your garden's earthworms. Likewise, there will be times you'll scratch your head and wonder why your flock is completely ignoring certain insects you want gone, such as box-elder bugs and multicolored Asian ladybeetles. (Both emit a noxious odor and therefore have few natural predators.)

Chickens will also avoid ingesting bees — and who can blame them? — but they'll chow down on hive beetles, which has encouraged many beekeepers to keep honeybee hives alongside their flocks.

With these natural exterminators at work in your backyard and vegetable patch, there is no need for the use of pesticides. Using chemicals can in fact be harmful or even fatal to your poultry flock and to your pets and even wild animals, too, especially if they ingest affected insects or plants that have been sprayed with these poisons.

In situations where relying on chickens for insect elimination is impractical — a backyard barbecue or a late-night soiree, for example — use a bug zapper, then offer the electrocuted pests to your poultry as crunchy treats.

THE FLIES HAVE IT

When it comes to chickens, flies are a double-edged sword.

ON THE POSITIVE SIDE, chickens love to eat flies and absolutely adore fly larvae. A growing number of chicken keepers are even starting to raise black soldier fly larvae to feed their flocks and improve the decomposition processes in their compost bins.



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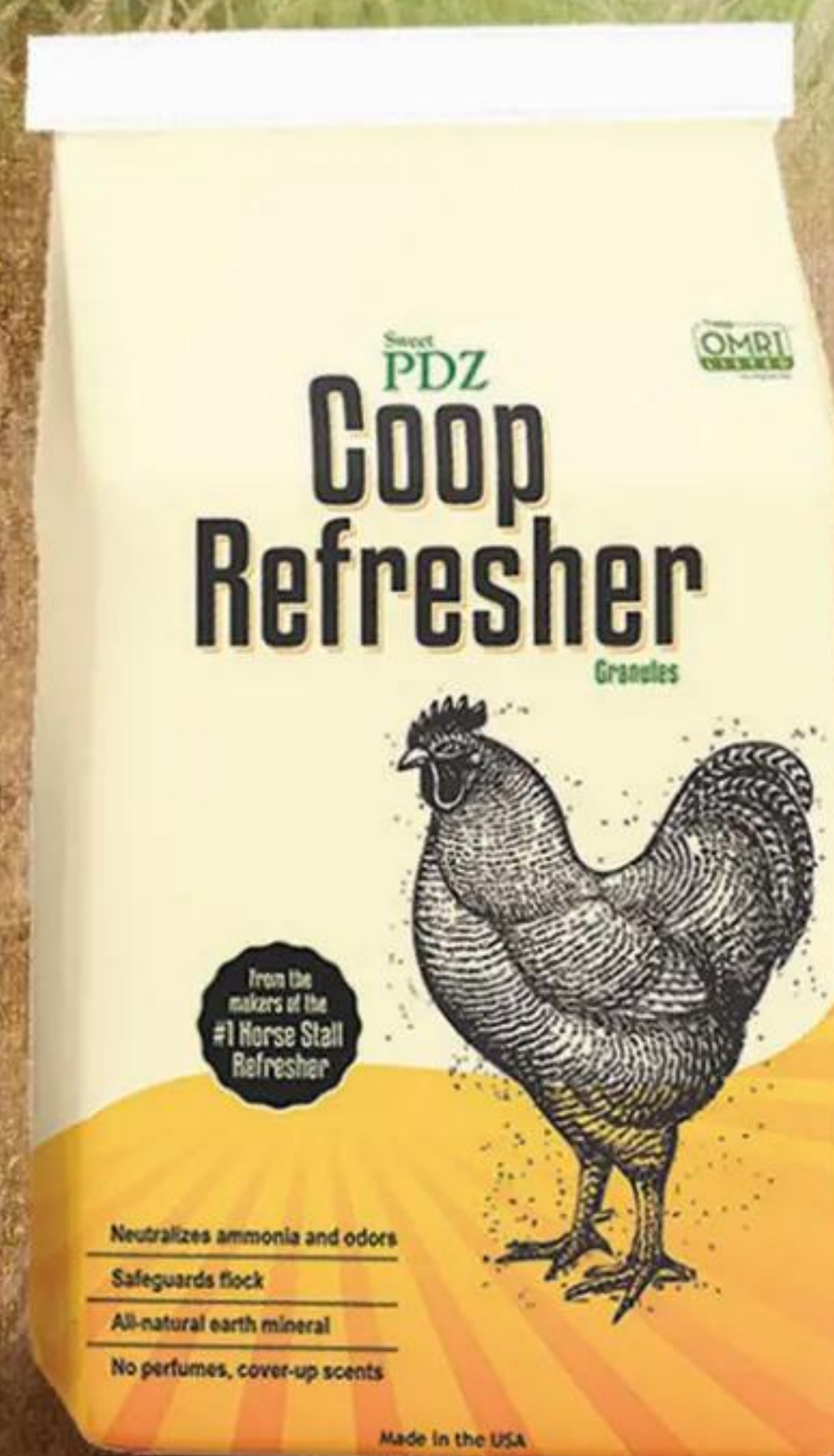
Mosquito infestations are problematic for many chicken owners, especially in humid and rainy regions where moist conditions prevail. As with flies, the key to keeping your coop skeeter-free is to ensure your hen-house is clean and dry.

- Provide ventilation to reduce the moisture inside the coop.
- Keep the coop interior clean, regularly removing droppings & replacing soiled litter with fresh bedding.
- Change the nest-box pads or litter frequently.
- Clean up food and water spills quickly & remove damp litter.
- Dispose of manure & soiled shavings away from the coop.
- Ensure there is no standing water in the chicken run.

Recent research conducted by Rickard Ignell, a professor at the Swedish University of Agricultural Science, yielded startling results: In studying *Anopheles arabiensis*, a malaria-carrying mosquito common in sub-Saharan Africa, Ignell and his team discovered that these mosquitoes didn't bite chickens and tended to avoid them. As part of the study, the researchers placed caged chickens by the beds of volunteers and discovered an 80% reduction in mosquito counts. When the team used devices that emitted a chicken odor, the mosquito reduction jumped to about 95%.

That's not to say that all mosquitoes avoid chickens. Knowing that at least one variety does, however, opens a door for further research and a potential goal of mosquito elimination from poultry farms in the future.

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7 Steps to Spring Cleaning

Your chickens may be impatiently awaiting the arrival of spring, but you don't mind holding off a little while longer. After all, the warm weather will bring with it an unwelcome task: cleaning out the coop that has sheltered your birds all winter long. Getting your coop set for the summer may not be a pleasant chore, but it's a necessary one if you wish to keep your hens healthy. Follow these seven steps and you'll have the work done before you know it.

OUTFIT YOURSELF CORRECTLY. Wear old clothes you don't mind soiling or ripping, muck boots, work gloves and something to cover your head. You're going to get dirty, so be prepared for it.

HAVE THE RIGHT TOOLS. A metal rake, a hand rake, a pitchfork, a shovel, a hand spade, a broom, a bucket, a sturdy scrub brush, a box of baking soda, a wheelbarrow, a rag and a hose (or steady source of water) will handle the mess. Don't forget a Phillips screwdriver, a flathead screwdriver, a pair of pliers, a hammer and nails, and coarse sandpaper for any repairs you might need to make. A few spare 2-by-2s should be on standby should you need to replace perches.

ALLOW YOUR BIRDS TO RANGE. Release them early, and make sure they stay away from their coop so you don't have any surprise visitors while you are scouring the place. Don't forget to set their feeder and waterer out where your flock can find them.

AIR IT OUT. Open up the pop door. Open the human-access door. Prop open the nest-box lid. If your coop has windows, open those as well. Allow as much air in as possible; just make sure there's no rain forecast that day.

CART THE MUCK AWAY. Don't just rake months of accumulated litter and droppings into your chicken run and call it a day unless you want vermin to invade. Use your pitchfork or shovel to pile everything into your wheelbarrow, and then haul it away to your compost pile. If you don't have a dedicated compost pile, this is the perfect time to start one.

USE SOME ELBOW GREASE. That's right: Put your back into it. The more effort you use to scrape, scour, scrub, and sweep, the cleaner your coop will be and the faster you'll get done. You've taken the time to get this far. You might as well put all your energy into doing the job right.

STEP BACK AND WATCH THE SHOW. Once you've scrubbed the walls and doors with your baking-soda solution, once you've sanded the perches, once you've set down fresh shavings and made your repairs, let your chickens back in. Watching their curiosity and excitement as they explore their "new" home makes all the work worthwhile.

ON THE NEGATIVE SIDE, houseflies are known to transmit the chicken tapeworm *Choanotaenia fundibulum*, a parasite which deprives its avian host of the nutrients it needs to thrive and survive, while green bottlefly larvae have been known to cause botulism, aka limberneck disease, in chickens.

Even worse, house flies, green bottleflies and black blowflies —

known as filth flies, which are flies that typically breed on animal feces — can also cause a horrifying condition called myiasis, aka flystrike.

While flystrike is far more common on such livestock as sheep, horses, cattle and even rabbits, it occasionally does affect chickens with devastating effects. In flystrike, adult female flies lay their eggs in a moist, odoriferous area of a chicken's body, often an open

If allowed to free-range, your chickens will prowl your yard to look for all sorts of insects to snack on, providing bug control for you and protein for them.

wound or a dirty vent. Within 24 hours, maggots hatch and begin to feast on dead cells, secretions and other bodily debris.

These maggots don't eat live tissue, but they do tunnel through it, causing irritation and injury to the chicken. The pungent smell of the infestation then attracts more flies, repeating and exacerbating the infestation.

Afflicted chickens may recover if brought to veterinary attention during the condition's early stages; unfortunately, the shock, pain and decay caused by flystrike often results in bird mortality.

FLY COMBAT OPERATIONS

To keep your flock healthy, the best course of action is to repel and keep flies out of the coop. Some methods, including hanging vanilla-scented air fresheners or clear baggies of water



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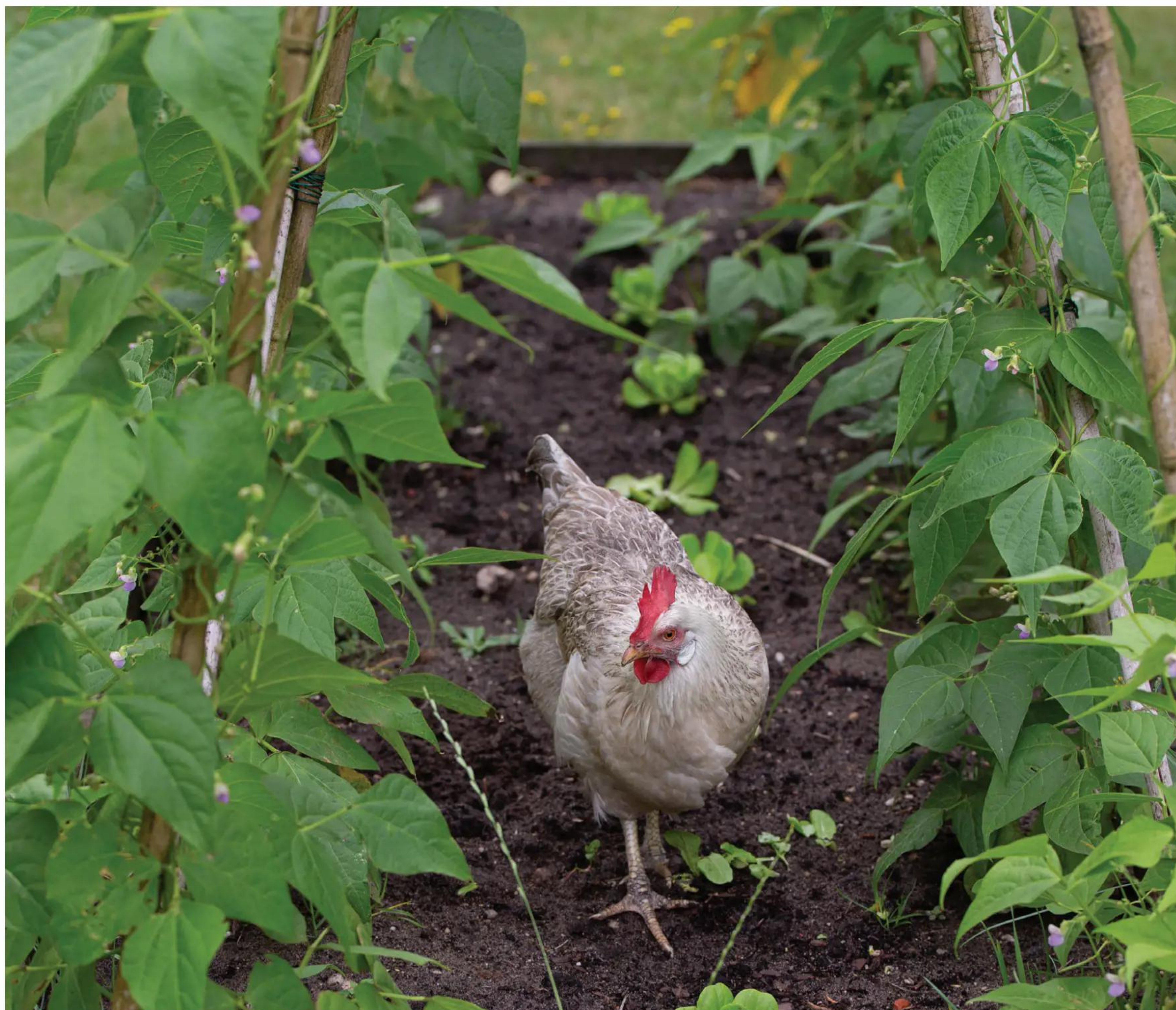
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with pennies in them, seem like old wives' tales yet have avid proponents who swear to their effectiveness. More practical antifly tactics include:

- Provide proper ventilation to reduce the moisture inside the coop.
- Cover ventilation openings with fine-wire mesh to prevent flies from entering.
- Keep the coop interior clean, regularly removing droppings and replacing soiled litter with fresh bedding.
- Mix food-grade diatomaceous earth in with fresh litter; the microscopic, razor-sharp edges of the diatoms cut into flies, causing them to desiccate and die.
- Change nest-box pads or litter frequently.
- Hang fly tape or fly traps in the upper area of your coop, away from where feathers can become enmeshed in their adhesive surfaces; replace frequently.
- Clean up food and water spills quickly and remove damp litter.
- Dispose of manure and soiled shavings well away from the coop.
- Ensure there is no standing water in the chicken run.

If fly infestation continues to be a problem, consider a proactive approach: fly predators.

These gnat-sized, nonstinging wasps lay their eggs inside fly pupae; the newly hatched parasites consume the pupae, preventing them from reaching adulthood.

Fly predators are harmless to humans, plants and other animals; the one drawback to their use is that chickens find them delicious, so several releases throughout the fly season may be necessary.

As with your lawn and garden, you'll want to stay away from chemical methods of eliminating pests from your coop. Using insecticides in such a small, enclosed area can seriously harm your birds, introducing toxins into their bodies no matter how well-ventilated your henhouse may be.

Keep your hens healthy and they'll repay you in kind by eagerly partaking of your yard's bountiful bug buffet — and entertaining you with their antics while they do so. 🐔

Ana Hotaling and her husband, Jae, own FMA Farms, a heritage-poultry farm in southeast Michigan.

Stinging Nettle

Boost your chickens' nutrition without breaking the bank by foraging wild Stinging Nettle (*Urtica dioica*, aka common nettle). Perennial stinging nettle grows throughout the world, including all of the U.S. except Hawaii.

Nettles like rich, moist soil, so find them in dense clumps on marshy meadows and along woodlands, fence rows, stream beds and ditches. Nettle's square, bristly stem grows from 2 to 7 feet tall and bears deeply serrated, pointed leaves that are downy underneath. Bristly hairs on the stem and leaves act like a hypodermic, injecting an irritant under the skin when touched.

Wear long sleeves, long pants and gloves when gathering or handling fresh nettles!

Technically, chickens consume raw nettles without harm, but it's best to harvest nettles and allow them to wilt before feeding. Air wilting or steaming them, or boiling in plenty of water for a few minutes, neutralizes their sting.

Several scientific studies indicate that due to their lutein and zeaxanthin content, feeding nettles to hens makes their eggs' yolks a richer yellow.

Consider This

Spinach contains 102 milligrams of calcium per 100 grams (about a cup) while kale contains 206 milligrams. Nettles boast 2,900 milligrams of calcium by the same measure. Iron: 2.96 in spinach,



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1.8 in kale, 41.8 in nettles. Magnesium: 96.8 for spinach, 37.4 in kale, and 860 in nettles.

Stinging nettle is also a fine source of chromium, cobalt, phosphorus, potassium, zinc, copper and sulfur, along with vitamins A, C, D, K and B complex.

Fun Fact

Nettle fibers have been used for thousands of years to weave nettle cloth. During World War I, German soldiers wore uniforms made of nettle cloth due to a shortage of cotton.

Gathering and processing wild plants is fun and rewarding. Plus, you might just find them very tasty too!



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Natural Broody Support

Have you ever noticed one of your hens suddenly acting like she's possessed? Her days revolve around the nesting box. She walks around with a fierce glint in her eye and, if looks could kill, you'd be dead if you hang around the coop too long. If you dare get close, you're met with a puffed-up feather display, shrieks that resemble the mating call of the pterodactyl, and the threat of a pecking that is sure to draw blood if you keep going.

Congratulations: You've got a broody hen!

This seasonal shift in your hen's behavior can be endearing, amusing and, at times, a little challenging. But with the right care and a few natural herbs, you can help her stay healthy and comfortable while she's in her motherly zone. In this column, we'll look at gentle, natural ways to support your broody girl, from herbs to helpful tips to make her journey to motherhood easier.

WHAT DOES "GOING BROODY" EVEN MEAN?

A hen "goes broody" when her hormones kick in and she feels the urge to sit on a nest and incubate eggs. Broodiness typically occurs in the spring and summer. However, we've had hens go broody in late fall. When we added supplemental light to our coop, some went broody in late winter as well.



Hens will sit on a nest for 21 days until the eggs hatch.



Sprinkle fresh herbs, such as mint, in the nesting area to help repel pests and keep it smelling fresh.

A broody hen will sit on a clutch of eggs for 21 days, only leaving once or twice daily to eat, drink and defecate. Although it's not necessary to provide additional support to hens while they're brooding (they'll most likely hatch their eggs just fine without your help,) you can support a broody Mama and make her more comfortable during her lie-in. And as any mama will tell you, extra support during baby-rearing is always welcome!

BEST HERBS FOR BROODY HENS

Thankfully, there are many herbs that can help our motherly hens while they're patiently hatching out their babies.

Nervine herbs, such as lavender, lemon balm, catnip and chamomile, which support the nervous system, help create a sense of calm in the nesting box. This is definitely helpful when your hen is sitting in the same spot for 21 days.

These herbs will also help repel pests such as mites. Although your broody hen will get up once per day to take a quick dust bath, she's more at risk for parasites because she's not moving around as much. Other strongly-scented herbs, such as mint and yarrow, can also help repel pests in the nesting box and keep it smelling fresh and clean.

Sprinkling vitamin-rich herbs in the nesting box, such as dried nettle, dandelion and red clover, will give your broody hen some badly needed nutrients during this time, especially since she's not eating regularly.



If you notice your hen walking around acting cranky, with outrageously fluffed-up feathers, she's probably gone broody.

Plenty of other herbs exist that will help strengthen and support her immune system. Sprinkle fresh or dried oregano, thyme and parsley in the nesting box regularly for her to peck at. Dried calendula is also a great addition for a broody hen because it's anti-inflammatory and supports skin health, which is useful for hens that are sitting for long periods.

Supporting a broody hen naturally is a wonderful way to make her nesting time more comfortable and keep her in peak health. By adding calming herbs such as lavender and chamomile, vitamin-rich greens such as nettle, and immune boosters including oregano and thyme to her nesting box, you're giving her the best of nature's support while she focuses on hatching her clutch. And, there's nothing better than having some sweet babies bobbing about the yard, following in her wake! 🐔

Heather Levin is an educator, herbalist and chicken wrangler of 30-plus chickens. She's also the founder of The Backyard Chickens Summit and Chicken Health Academy, a pioneering online learning academy that teaches natural and emergency chicken-care strategies. Find out more at www.chickenhealthacademy.com.

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Chicken-tractor gardening provides a no-till solution for busy gardeners.

ARTICLE & PHOTOS BY KATE DOWNHAM



Chickens happily foraging, scratching, drinking and posing for the camera in the chicken tractor.

I first became acquainted with chicken-tractor gardening through *The Permaculture Home Garden*, by writer, researcher and food gardener Linda Woodrow. Although her book was designed for warmer climates than my own, I found many lessons in thoughtful garden design and working with the nature of chickens that appealed to me enough to create my own chicken-tractored garden.

Other popular permaculture ideas similar to the chicken tractor are the rotational pen system and chicken caravans combined with electric poultry netting. In this article, I'll discuss those ideas as well.

CHICKEN & GARDEN BENEFITS

Anyone that has witnessed a hen get into a newly-planted garden will know the damage that she can cause. Chickens love to scratch for bugs, eat tender greens and kick mulch everywhere. But what if the damaging effect of a chicken's scratching could instead be put to use in areas where we want to have the ground dug over?

Chicken manure is high in nitrogen, and when combined with carbon-rich mulch such as straw or wood chips, it creates an excellent carbon-to-nitrogen ratio for composting in a heap or for slowly composting in place to feed the soil. As for the mulch itself, the chickens will delight in scratching through it and finding things to eat, spreading it on your garden bed in the process.

With chicken tractors or rotational pens, chickens can be concentrated in one garden area at a time to do their scratching, manuring and mulch-spreading. Once they're moved to a new area, this gives you a weeded, scratched-over, fertilized and mulched garden that is almost ready to plant. This helps amazingly with focusing gardening efforts and succession



Portable fencing gives many options for moving your chickens around the homestead.



planting and makes the busy planting season less overwhelming.

With your chickens in the garden, it means they're close to hand whenever slugs, snails, badly damaged produce and weeds are found; all of these things are excellent food for chickens, and quickly feeding them to nearby hens rather than leaving them in the garden helps to reduce pests, diseases and weeds.

CHALLENGES

Gardening with chickens has many benefits, but it isn't all sunshine and roses. This approach is only for people who can make the commitment to care for their chickens every day. It's ideally suited to homesteaders and multitaskers. Gardens can be designed to feed the chickens a significant portion of their diet, but most chicken-tractor gardeners will find they need to supplement their chickens, either with grain or with appropriate kitchen scraps.

On sloping ground, the mulch and manure will drift to the downhill side of the garden bed, and even if you rake it back up to the top later, there will always be a difference in fertility. This can be dealt with by creating small terraces or by raking some of the mulch back up and

accepting that the uphill side is going to be a bit less fertile than the downhill side.

Uneven ground can be a challenge. Straight after moving my chickens, I walk around the perimeter of the garden bed and make sure there aren't any holes where they can escape. My chicken tractor has a skirt of wire around it on the outside, so on uneven ground it's possible to weigh down a section of this skirt to cover any dips. I use large pots of herbs to do this.

As with any method of keeping chickens, predators will need to be considered.

THE MOVABLE CHICKEN TRACTOR

The principle behind the moveable chicken tractor approach is to create a moveable chicken pen, in a size that will fit over one garden bed or several garden beds. For the full scratching effect of the chickens, it's essential that the bottom of the pen be open to the ground. The correct amount of chickens in this pen shouldn't be more than one chicken per 11 square feet.

For a full tractoring and fertilizing effect, the chicken pen is moved to new ground every two weeks. At each stop, the chickens will happily gobble up weeds and scratch over the ground.



When when thrown some mulch, they'll also help to break it down and spread their manure in it.

Chicken tractors are either designed with wheels, for one person to roll them around the garden, or to be lightweight enough for one or two people to carry. My pen is a 13-foot geodesic dome which I constructed from 3/4-inch PVC pipes and covered with chicken wire, using instructions found online. It's tall, strong and lightweight enough for me to stand in the middle and easily walk it to a new garden area.

A double-sided, heavy-duty tarp is used to cover part of the dome, to shelter the chickens from the harshest weather conditions; one side of the tarp is silver and reflects heat. I face this side inside the dome in the cooler parts of the year and outside the dome in summer. This size of dome comfortably holds 12 hens and a rooster and creates a large circular garden bed ready for planting every two weeks.



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THE ROTATIONAL PEN SYSTEM

The rotational pen system usually involves higher startup costs than a simple chicken tractor, but it's very useful for larger flocks, larger gardens and cold climates. This system involves a permanent chicken coop with a permanent strawyard attached, with closable chicken doors coming off in at least two places, leading to fenced areas of garden.

Some designs feature a central coop, with four or more garden sections surrounding it; other designs might have the coop and a long rectangular strawyard on one side, with two or more garden sections coming off the strawyard. The garden sections can also be created with electric poultry netting or other portable fencing.

The length of time the chickens will spend in each section of garden will depend on your flock size, the size of each section, how overgrown it is and how thoroughly you want it to

Chicken tractors are great for garden locations.



be scratched over. Similar flock densities to chicken tractors (one chicken per 10 square feet) will mean faster scratching, while a lower stocking density will require more time.

THE CHICKEN CARAVAN SYSTEM

I am most familiar with this approach from Justin Rhodes' YouTube videos (theJustinRhodes Show). He's a homesteader who will surround a moveable chicken coop and wood chip mulch with electric poultry netting to create a chicken garden area anywhere on his homestead.

The benefit of this approach is the flexibility: If you don't need your chickens to be digging a garden bed at any moment, you can easily enclose a compost heap for them to turn, an orchard to clean up or a section of pasture for them to help spread manure and clean up unwanted insects.

DEALING WITH SOIL COMPACTION

Chickens concentrated in any area will compact the soil, and a broadfork is the ideal tool for fixing the compaction and gently aerating the soil. Once my chickens have moved to a new place, we simply go over their bed with a broadfork, and it's ready to plant. Regular garden forks can also be used.

SEEDS VS. SEEDLINGS

Planting established seedlings in a mulched chicken-tractor bed couldn't be simpler: Just make a hole in the mulch, add your seedling and water it in. When I want to plant seeds and the chickens have left lots of mulch, I use a rake to create furrows in the mulch and then sow directly in these furrows.

HOMEGROWN CHICKEN FOOD

Once I've harvested our food from our chicken garden beds, if there is enough time before the chickens are due back, I sow seeds of chicken food such as grains, excess leafy green seeds, legumes and edible weeds. Even if there isn't time to sow this mixture, weeds and overgrown plants in garden beds are often a fact of life, and the chickens will readily gobble these up, too.

Perennial and annual fodder plants can be designed to be a part of every chicken-garden bed. If there is a part of your bed that is hard to reach, this is a great place to put in chicken fodder plants with edible leaves or seeds. The chickens will harvest it more easily than you can.

The areas surrounding your chicken-tractored garden can also be used for planting chicken food crops. Comfrey makes an excellent perennial mulch and poultry food crop, and it's a

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Comfrey (above) is an excellent perennial mulch and chicken fodder plant.



Lawnmower grass-catchers make great portable nesting boxes.

simple matter of cutting down plants and throwing them to the chickens.

ADDING FRUIT TREES

While chicken tractors can't enclose your fruit trees, dwarf fruit trees won't shade your garden too much and benefit from some interaction with chickens. My garden incorporates dwarf fruit trees planted 3 to 4 feet from the edge of the chicken tractor beds. This gives some interaction between the tree root zone and the chickens, and the fast rotation of the chicken tractors ensures that the roots aren't damaged by scratching.

Keeping fruit trees close to the chicken tractor garden makes it possible to feed the chickens and re-move fallen fruit that could cause pest problems in one simple action.

CHICKENS IN THE WINTER

Depending on your climate, during the winter most gardeners won't have many options for planting out a newly-tractored bed, and the chickens will often need more protection from the weather than many chicken tractors can provide. Here are some options for winter:

- Continue the two-week rotation, heavily mulching the beds to protect the soil until they're ready to plant.
- Slow down the rotation during the winter, so that the chickens are being moved every four to six weeks.
- For climates with mild winters, one approach is to have a heavily-mulched sacrifice area where the chickens are kept in their tractor for the winter and regularly given fresh mulch to scratch through. Fertility will build up in this area and can be used for compost or for mulching nearby heavy-feeding perennial plants.
- The most suitable solution for cold-climate gardeners is to move the flock into a greenhouse or winter housing for the coldest months and bring the rotation back into play in the springtime.

For the rotational pen system, this is where a well-designed strawyard and coop comes in handy. When the chickens aren't needed for tracting work, the garden doors are shut, and they simply stay in the coop and strawyard. If this is your plan for winter, it's important to allow enough space in the coop and strawyard for the chickens to be there full-time. 🐔

Kate Downham writes books teaching practical homestead skills, including A Year in an Off-Grid Kitchen and Backyard Dairy Goats. She homesteads in Tasmania, Australia, with her family of eight, fermenting and preserving food in traditional ways as part of their off-grid life. She blogs at www.thenourishinghearthfire.com.

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MAKING ROOM TO Roost

Chickens need perches, as they love the feeling of being above everyone else.

BY KRISTINA MERCEDES URQUHART



Roost Rules

In cold climates, round perches put birds' feet at a greater risk of frostbite. In these areas, use a flat, wooden perch that forces birds to spread out their feet so their toes are kept warm by the chickens' breasts.

Allow 10 inches of roost per bird and place the roosts 18 inches apart.

Chickens instinctively want to sleep in the highest point available and gather together for protection and warmth while they sleep.

It's a misconception that chickens spend their nights sleeping soundly in the confinement and safety of their nest boxes. As descendants of Asiatic ground fowl, our domestic chickens have learned that to survive, raise their brood and not fall prey to all manner of predators, they need to nest low and roost high.

On farms and in backyards where our domestic chickens roam, those evolutionary traits translate to the structure of the coop. Most coops recognize and respect the natural urges of chickens: Many nest boxes are located near the floor (though some are raised higher for ease of collecting eggs), and roosts are situated a bit higher. If your coop fails to meet these needs, it can result in an unhappy flock, confusion over where to lay eggs and a messy nest box.

COOP ETIQUETTE

When constructing new roosts or replacing old ones, a good general rule is not to place a roost (or perch) above anything you don't want to become soiled. Chickens are notorious nighttime poopers, relieving themselves often while roosting. As such, nest boxes should never be located below roosts, if it can be helped.

To collect droppings for a compost pile and garden and keep the coop clean, place droppings boards below the roosts. Though not a foolproof system, droppings boards can be made from a shallow bin or collection area (think of a raised-bed garden) with heavy-duty wire mesh covering the top (sturdy hardware cloth is a favorite). This will allow the droppings to fall through for collection but prevent the birds from stepping in their droppings — to some degree, anyway.

To keep birds from roosting — and therefore defecating — in their nest boxes, locate boxes low to the ground. Most people find that, because their nest boxes are high or mounted on the wall, birds mistake the perches used to enter the nest boxes as roosts. Injured birds, broody hens, new layers or birds low on the pecking order are candidates for this confusion, seeking safety near the nest boxes rather than on the roosts.

PERCHING & PREENING

Roosts aren't only for sleeping. Chicks just a few days old love to practice flying and perching on anything they can reach, including the edges of their brooder.

Chickens of all ages enjoy testing out new perches, hopping up to balance on a log or stump and will preen together as a community activity during the day.

HEIGHT & HIERARCHY

The higher a bird perches, the higher it is in the pecking order of the flock. If your coop sports a ladder as a roost, with different levels of perch space available, the alpha birds will gravitate toward the top when it comes time to roost. If there's a rooster in your flock, he'll almost always be at the very top. A flock's hierarchy can change over time as birds become sick or weak, die, age

or go broody, or if they've been removed from the flock for a time. Take a peek at your flock while they roost at night to get an indication of where each bird falls within the group's pecking order.

TROUBLESHOOTING

Some pullets may not figure out the whole roosts-are-for-sleeping and nest-boxes-are-for-laying bit until sexual maturity (around 19 to 25 weeks). If so, you may find a flock of them sleeping on the ground in the corner or a lone bird that has taken to a nest box to avoid the bedtime bullying of the roost routine. (This is when the flock clambers up onto the roost, ruffling feathers, squawking and pecking at each other).

If this is the case, be diligent about putting your young birds on the roost by hand at dusk for a few days to a week; that should be all it takes for them to get the idea. Soon, they'll learn that a roost is a much more comfortable (and much cooler) place to sleep than a nest box.

A RESPECTABLE ROOST

The ideal roost is simple to find and even easier to make. Most commercial coops have roosts built into their designs. If your roost is unsatisfactory, or if you want to add more, an inexpensive solution is easy to find: A 2-by-4 piece of lumber works perfectly.

Turned on its side, with the edges sanded down, this piece of wood makes a great roost. The semi-flattened, 2-inch-wide side of the lumber's edge allows the birds' feet to flatten slightly, making it possible for the chickens to cover their feet with their feathers while they sleep, keeping them warm. The wooden texture is also just right, making it easy to grip and roost comfortably all night long.

If you want to get creative, sturdy tree branches make suitable roosts, as well. An ideal branch is 1½ to 2 inches in diameter, free of thorns or sharp branches, and solid. Don't use anything made of plastic or that is too smooth, such as a closet dowel; the rounded shape and smooth finish make it difficult for birds to balance.

Lastly, a perfect perch is spacious. Allow about 10 inches of roost space per standard-sized bird; a bit less for bantams, about 8 inches. When in doubt, provide more space. If the birds get chilly in the winter nights, they'll huddle closer together for warmth and spread out in the heat of summer.

All chickens need a safe, secure place to roost. With a little knowhow and some ingenuity, you can provide a fun play apparatus, a salon or a comfortable "bed" for your birds with properly placed roosts. Provide a perch for play and preening, and you'll foster healthy habits and a happy social structure. 🐔

Kristina Mercedes Urquhart writes from the mountains of North Carolina, where she lives with her husband and daughter, dogs, chickens and bees.

Food for Thought

Chickens seeming can and will eat anything,
so educate yourself on what to feed in moderation
and what to avoid at all costs.

BY ERIN SNYDER

e Chickens love treats and will happily eat table scraps, fresh fruits and vegetables, grains and much more. Treats bring our flocks so much joy, as they offer a tasty extravagance and sprinkling some on the ground helps engage in natural foraging behaviors. However, some common treats can be quite detrimental for a chicken's health and cause sickness and a shorter lifespan. Before heading out to feed your flock some delicious treats, check out this list of foods to avoid feeding.



NIGHTSHADES

There are 70 varieties of nightshade plants, including tomatoes, peppers, eggplant, bitter-sweet and Jerusalem cherry, many of which can be harmful to your flock. Nightshades contain alkaloids, which cause appetite loss, increased salivation, weakened heart rate and trouble breathing.

Raw potato peels, for example, should never be considered a treat. Unripe tomatoes, too, are high in solanine (a toxin for chickens and other poultry), so many poultry experts suggest only feeding very ripe fruit in moderation to avoid chickens consuming too much solanine. Even when feeding only overripe tomatoes, this toxin will build up in the chicken's body over time, causing other health problems to arise.

Some veterinarians are noticing a link between chickens who consume tomatoes and chronic crop problems, including crop impactions and sour crops.

Feeding Tip: Looking for some other favorite garden vegetables to feed your flock? Peas, cucumbers, zucchini, and other squashes are some favorite chicken vegetables.

Chickens will eat almost anything so be sure to provide only good options.



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MEAT

Chickens are omnivores (meaning they eat plant and animal matter). It's a commonly known fact that chickens eat bugs, but it may be hard to imagine that your sweet hens can also eat frogs, rodents and songbirds, too.

Due to their love of hunting small mammals, birds and amphibians, many chicken owners believe that chickens should be fed other meat such as beef, fish, lamb, pork and poultry. However, a chicken's body isn't made to process fattier meats such as pork and beef, and all meats, especially poultry, can make a flock sick. Add in the excessive salt and grease, and it's best to stay away from the meat scraps.

BREAD

One of the worst treat options for chickens, waterfowl and even songbirds, bread lacks nutritional value and can cause severe health problems and even death. Bread's high yeast content causes an imbalance of yeast and bacteria in a chicken's crop, which can make them sick. The high sodium levels in bread are also bad for your flock's health.

When feeding bread in large quantities, chickens will feel full and often refuse to eat their feed. While this behavior may not be a problem immediately, if continuing long-term, chickens will begin to suffer from malnutrition, causing disease and other health problems to arise.

Another downside to feeding bread is that bread grows mold extremely fast, especially in warm, humid climates. The mold pores are harmful if ingested and can also harm the respiratory system if inhaled, leading to aspergillosis and other respiratory problems.

Bread has been known to cause crop impactions in chickens and other poultry as the crop can't process the bread. Crop impactions can quickly turn deadly and are much easier to avoid than treat. Studies also suggest that feeding bread to chickens, waterfowl, and other birds can lead to shorter lifespans.

YOGURT & OTHER DAIRY PRODUCTS

Filled with probiotics and other nutrients, it may seem difficult to believe that yogurt is bad for your chickens. While this delicious dairy product may not actually be considered toxic to our feathered friends, if fed too much yogurt, problems can start to arise.

Did you know? Chickens are considered lactose intolerant. In "Lactose in Animal and Human Feeding: A Review" in the September 1957 issues of *Journal of Dairy Science* (Vol. 40, Issue 9), researchers found that poultry were

unable to utilize even moderate levels of lactose. This is because a hen's body lacks the enzymes needed to process dairy products. Feeding chickens dairy products such as yogurt can cause diarrhea and should be avoided.

Feeding Tip: Probiotics are a critical part of a chicken's everyday diet. Instead of feeding your flock yogurt, choose a probiotic specifically formulated for chickens.

SUNFLOWER SEEDS

High in vitamins, minerals, fiber and protein, these nutritious seeds are often considered to be some of the best treats for backyard flocks. However, if fed in high quantities, they can also be one of the deadliest treats.

Sunflower seeds can cause crop impactions if fed in high amounts and should be avoided if you have a hen that is prone to crop impactions or sour crop. Due to the large amounts of fat in sunflower seeds, chickens consuming

Overeating

While many chickens will regulate the amount of food they eat and will not stuff themselves, some hens will continue to stuff treats into their already full crops.

Why some chickens overeat while others do not remains a mystery to the owner, but what's most important is to be able to identify the problem and find a solution.

In my flock, the Speckled Sussex are always the hens to overeat, refusing to walk away from the tempting treats even after they have had their fill. The best way I have found to prevent this problem is to feed slightly fewer treats per day to my flock than I think they could comfortably eat without stuffing themselves. Treats should never exceed more than ten percent of a chicken's diet.

Symptoms and Diagnosis: Hens who have overeaten are usually easy to spot as they will often act uncomfortable (refusing to move around and acting uncomfortable while perching). Another telltale sign to look for is an overly extended crop.

Hens who have overeaten may not completely empty their crops overnight. Due to this, hens who have overeaten may refuse to eat the next morning. If this happens, monitor the hen for illness and check the crop periodically throughout the day to ensure the crop continues to empty.



large amounts are at an increased risk of developing fatty liver syndrome, blood clots and circulatory problems. Feed sunflower seeds in moderation to prevent these health concerns and help your hens live longer, healthier lives.

Feeding Tip: To prevent crop problems, place sunflower seeds on a cutting board and chop into smaller pieces using a large kitchen knife.

CAT FOOD

Cat food is often provided for molting chickens to provide an extra boost of protein. Providing molting hens with extra protein is important; however, cat food isn't the best option to feed molting chickens.

If you have ever compared the nutritional values of cat food and layer ration, it's easy to see why cat food is harmful for backyard flocks. Cat food has more than double the amount of protein than layer and six times the amount of fat, and it's filled with many ingredients that chickens have a difficult time digesting. Feeding cat food to backyard flocks can cause severe health problems, including

Scratch is fine in moderation, but use a summer blend during hot months and a winter blend for fall and winter.

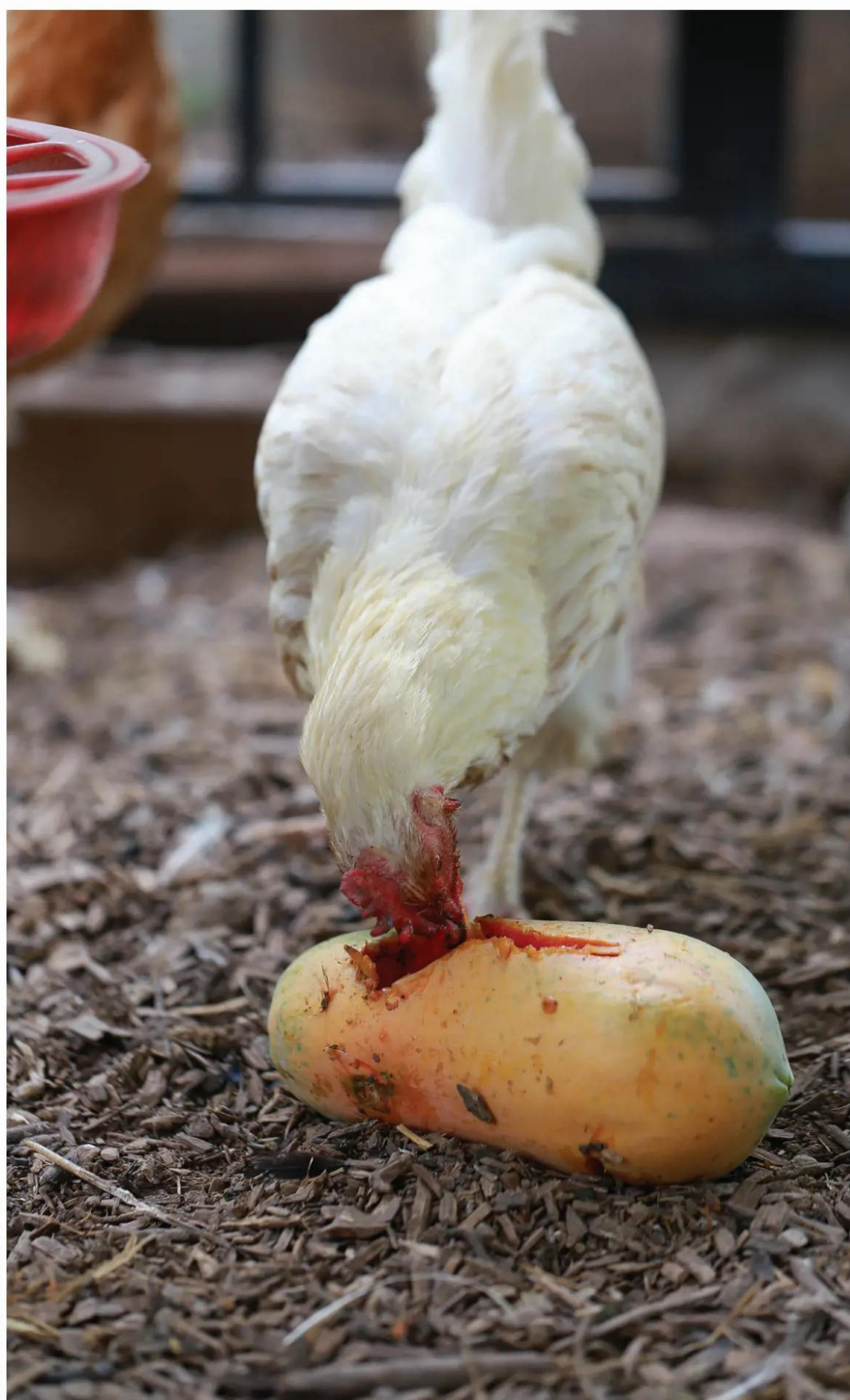
kidney failure, obesity, blood clots, fatty liver syndrome and more.

SCRATCH

Unlike other treats mentioned in this article, scratch has a time and a place but shouldn't be a large portion of a chicken's daily diet. High in carbohydrates, scratch is best given in the winter right before chickens roost for the night.

Scratch shouldn't be given during the warmer months, as a chicken's body needs to work hard to digest it, creating extra body heat. This trait is important during the winter months, especially in northern climates where temperatures stay below freezing (32 degrees Fahrenheit). However, in the warmer months, the extra heat can be hard for the hens, causing heat-related issues.

Most fruit and veg are fine for an entertaining snack, but avoid nightshades.



Too much scratch will cause hens to become fat and cause organ failure and other health problems. This is especially problematic in layers, as fat hens will have a decrease in egg production and an increase in egg-related health problems.

PASTA

Pasta is often overlooked as a bad treat option because it lacks the salt and yeast content that bread has. But that doesn't mean that pasta is a good treat choice for backyard flocks. Pasta can be difficult for chickens to digest and can cause serious crop problems, especially when feeding spaghetti and other long noodles.

By swapping out pasta and offering your chickens healthy treat options, you should see a reduction in crop impactions and sour crops in your flock.

STORE-BOUGHT LETTUCE GREENS

Lettuce and other salad greens are more likely to carry E. coli, salmonella and other bacteria than greens you grow in your own garden. These bacteria can make humans extremely sick, and for chickens, it's even worse. Due to their small bodies and delicate digestive systems, these harmful pathogens can kill chickens and cause a bacterial epidemic to arise in the flock.

Feeding Tip: During the cold winter months when fresh greens can't be grown outdoors, supplement your flock's diet with other safe greens such as sprouted grains, broccoli and peas. Thaw peas and frozen broccoli florets before feeding them to your flock.

CORN

Whether field corn or sweet corn, cracked or whole, corn should only be fed in strict moderation. Corn is high in carbohydrates and has little nutritional value and should not be a part of a chicken's daily diet. Feeding too much corn can cause hens to become obese, causing health problems such as fatty liver syndrome and egg-related problems, including egg binding, poor egg production and oviduct prolapse.

Feeding our chickens treats is just as much fun for us as it is for our flock. And by choosing healthy treat options, you can make the experience nutritious too! 🐔

Erin Snyder and her family have raised chickens and ducks for nearly two decades. She is passionate about all things poultry but is especially interested in poultry nutrition, predator protection, egg-laying disorders and helping chickens live their best lives well into their golden years. Follow her on Instagram @thehenhousehygge.

Treats, greens, snacks, etc. should be given in moderation and part of, not in addition, to a regular feed. Obesity in hens can lead to some severe health problems.





Homemade suet cakes with fat, sunflower seeds, mealworms and nuts are great for flocks.



wing tip

Make these treats to give your flock something to crow about.

These munchies are easy-to-make morsels that consist of a few ingredients: beef suet and dried mealworms, nuts and/or seeds.

You can purchase suet at your supermarket's butcher counter. Find dried mealworms at wild-bird and farm-supply stores. Nuts/seeds are everywhere.

For best results, use a silicon mold, as you can release the treats by simply pushing up on the bottom of the mold. I recommend the mold shaped like rectangular bars.

Render the suet in a saucepot over medium heat, stirring continually to ensure its creaminess. Once all the suet is melted, add the dried mealworms, blending carefully to keep the mealworms as intact as possible.

Remove from heat and ladle into the molds.

Sprinkle several mealworms over the top of each bar, gently pressing them in. Allow the filled molds to cool completely at room temperature, then place the molds into your refrigerator and chill for 15 to 30 minutes. This brief chilling helps with the unmolding of the bars, since the suet will soften when handled.

Avoid placing the molds directly into the refrigerator, as this will give the suet a grainy consistency. Wrap each suet bar individually in plastic wrap and keep chilled in an airtight container until you're ready to offer these chicken treats to your flock. 🐔



OKSANA SCHMIDT/STOCK.ADOBE.COM/STOCK.ADOBE.COM

OKSANA SCHMIDT/STOCK.ADOBE.COM

SUPER *Treats*

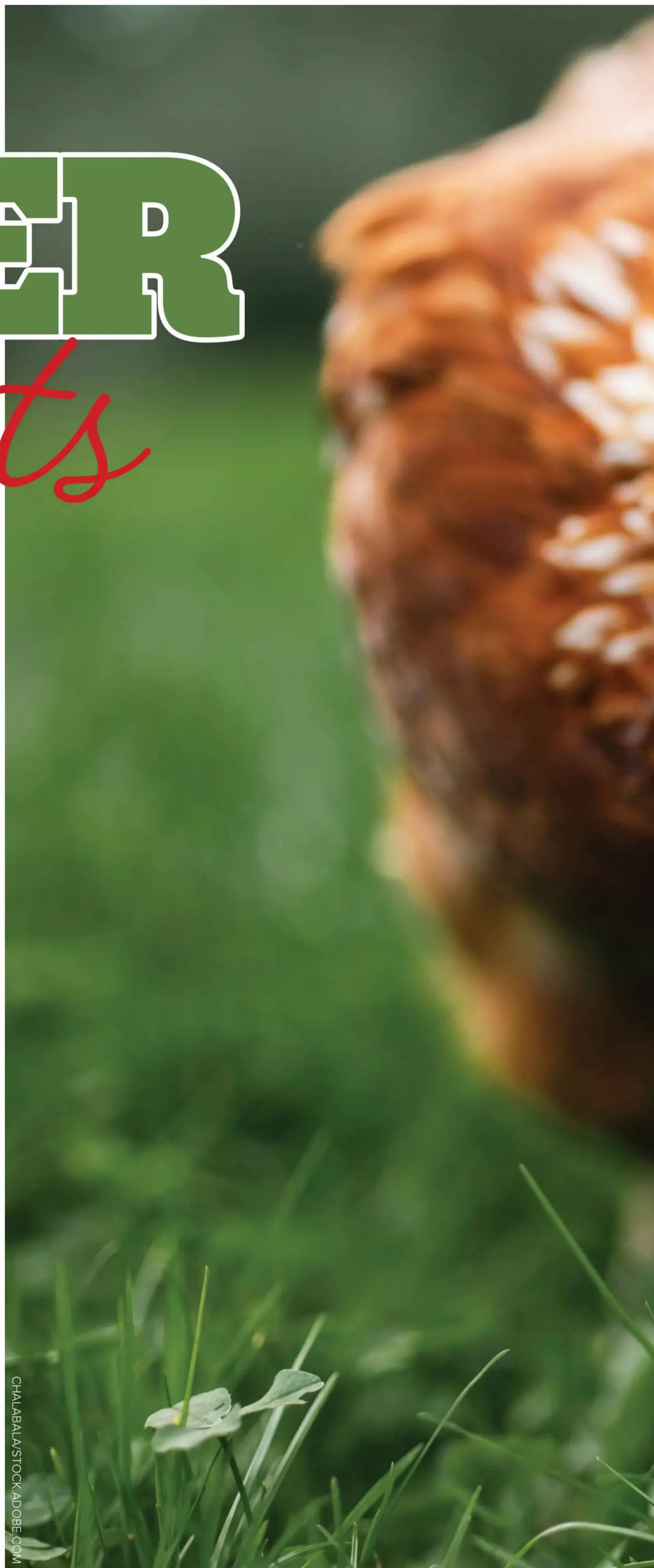
Give your flock some added nutrition to revive, refresh and re-energize.

RECIPES & PHOTOS BY STEPHANIE STATON

*T*ake care not to overfeed — scratch and treats should not exceed 10% of a hen's diet — but keep in mind that your chickens love to have treats outside of mealtimes. According to educator and backyard chicken-keeper Dorothy Munn at Michigan State University Extension in "Tips For Managing Backyard Chickens in the Winter," you should even offer your birds additional high-energy feed such as corn or sunflower seeds in winter to help meet their increased caloric needs in the cold weather. A good tactic is to provide this additional feed in the evening to help birds manage the overnight drop in temperatures more efficiently.

Munn also reminds us that active birds are happy birds. "Allowing birds to keep themselves busy by foraging will keep them from activities like pecking each other," she writes. "Scattering corn or sunflower seeds in your coop at your evening feeding will allow birds the opportunity to scratch for these treats. Consider suspending a head of cabbage in your coop to keep birds entertained. Toss loose straw or add corn stalks, wood chips or brush to your run area; your birds will forage for any bugs that may find a home in the degrading surface."

You can help to ease the stress and boredom of a normal flock by offering your feathered friends some homemade, scrumptious, energy-packed treats. So get your chicken-themed apron on, and let's get to prep-ping, mixing and making!



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CHICKEN SCRATCH

FROM-SCRATCH CHICKEN SCRATCH

In “Feeding Chickens for Egg Production,” University of Kentucky poultry extension associate Jacquie Jacob states that chickens are compelled to scratch. “They use their toes to mix up litter or scrape the ground in search of various seeds, greens, grit or insects to eat,” she writes. “Spreading scratch grains — cracked, rolled or whole grains such as corn, barley, oats or wheat — encourages this behavior.” During winter, scratch helps keep chickens active when unfrozen foraging can be difficult to come by, but as with most treats, moderation is key.

“Chickens that eat too many scratch grains have less of an appetite for more nutritious feed,” Jacob writes. “If you are using scratch grains, feed them to chickens in the afternoon after birds have eaten complete feed and then provide only as much scratch grains as chickens can finish in 15 to 20 minutes.”

While chicken scratch is readily available at feed-supply stores, you can make your own with this simple recipe. Keep in mind that chickens don’t have teeth and natural grit can be difficult for them to source on the frozen tundra, so when feeding scratch grains, provide some

store-bought grit to help them grind and digest the grains properly.

INGREDIENTS

- 8 cups whole wheat
- 8 cups millet
- 6 cups cracked corn
- 6 cups unshelled, unsalted sunflower seeds
- 12 cups whole oats
- 6 cups flax seed

PREPARATION

Combine dry ingredients, and store in air-tight container until ready to use.

COPYCAT FORAGE CAKES

Many wild-bird species including woodpeckers, sapsuckers, nuthatches and warblers love suet, which is basically a fat-packed treat. Traditionally pressed into cakes, suet provides birds with a concentrated source of protein, one of the most important elements in helping them maintain energy. In *Backyard Birding: A Guide to Attracting and Identifying Birds* (2011), author Randi Minetor writes that overwintering birds require energy for warmth. “In fact, some birds must eat constantly all day to take in the protein and fat they need to survive in frigid winter’s nights,” he notes.

With a few poultry-approved ingredient substitutions, you can make your own protein- and fat-packed suet cakes for your flock with

the following recipe. You could even make this treat into a cute gift for fellow chicken keepers by freezing it in a miniature Bundt pan and presenting it with a ribbon through the center for hanging. Note: The melting point for coconut oil is 74 degrees Fahrenheit, so this works best as a winter treat and should be fed in a cool, shaded area.



**FORAGE
CAKES**



Shop SMART

Purchase ingredients in bulk from a local feed-supply store or online. Buying these items at the grocery store will quickly add up! Consider storing ingredients separately in sealed containers so you can mix as needed.

INGREDIENTS

- 2 cups From-Scratch Chicken Scratch
- ½ cup dried mealworms or fish meal
- ½ cup dried vegetables (e.g., peas, carrots, celery and/or beets)
- ½ cup dried cranberries
- 1 tablespoon dried parsley or oregano
- ¼ cup molasses or sorghum
- 1¼ cups melted coconut oil, suet, tallow or lard

PREPARATION

In a large bowl, combine the dry ingredients. Drizzle mixture with molasses or sorghum, stirring to coat well. Add oil, and work into the mixture by hand. Press mixture into a parchment-lined baking pan to 1-inch thickness, and refrigerate to set.

Break into squares to fit a suet-cake holder, if using, and freeze until ready to feed.

Don't provide more than your birds can consume within 20 or 30 minutes to reduce spoilage and rodent issues. Hang out of direct sun to prevent melting.

GOT GRAIN TREAT BALLS

Being literally cooped up can turn your docile flock into a bunch of grouchy hen-peckers! While you should let them out to forage when appropriate, some days are just going to be too cold, wet or muddy. During those days, your hens will need something to peck (besides each other), and these treat balls are a fun way to help them keep the doldrums at bay for a few hours at least.

INGREDIENTS

- 1 cup unshelled, unsalted sunflower seeds
- 1 cup unsalted squash seeds
- 1 cup dried veggies (e.g., peas, carrots, peppers and/or celery)
- ½ cup dried fruits

PREPARATION

In a large bowl, combine all the ingredients.

Cut a line across four holes in a golf-ball-sized Wiffle ball, squeeze to open and push



TREAT BALLS

through bowl to fill with mix or wedge a funnel in the opening and pour mixture into ball. Allow to close and roll or hang in coop run.

Seal unused mixture in airtight container. Empty any uneaten snacks from ball, rinse and let dry for the next play date.



Treat balls are a fun way to give your flock something to peck besides each other.



**FLOCK
BLOCK**

CHIP OFF THE OLD BLOCK

The traditional calcium supplement for a layer diet is oyster shells, which look a bit like grit and are ground to the point that hens don't have to work to eat them. This recipe will provide some additional calcium for those eggs, and the energy needed to get those eggs laid in the dead of winter!

INGREDIENTS

- 4 cups From-Scratch Chicken Scratch
- ½ cup oyster shells or crushed limestone
- ½ cup molasses or sorghum
- 1½ cups coconut oil, tallow or lard

PREPARATION

Combine dry ingredients in large bowl. Drizzle with molasses, stirring to coat well. Pour mixture into small bucket or sanitized plastic milk jug with top cut off.

Melt coconut oil, and pour over mixture. Let cool, and remove from container to serve.

If you want to hang the block, consider inserting a chain or loop of twine before adding the melted oil; lay a stick across the container's top for the twine to rest on while the mixture sets.

NO-CHICKEN SALAD

Max out your cool-weather crop's potential by tossing the leafy greens from crops and winter grasses into a delicious salad for your chickens. Just keep in mind that excessive table scraps can adversely affect egg production.

INGREDIENTS

- handful broccoli greens, turnip greens and/or mustard greens
- handful kale
- handful clover
- 2 tablespoons fresh oregano, destemmed
- dried meal worms to garnish (optional)



**NO-CHICKEN
SALAD**

PREPARATION

Combine fresh greens and oregano, sprinkle with meal worms and serve. Clean out and com-post any greens that aren't consumed within 10 to 20 minutes to avoid spoilage or rodent issues.

Chicken-keeping certainly has its unique challenges for chickens and chicken-keepers alike. But with a little TLC and DIY, you can keep your coop cozy and your flock functioning throughout the year. 🐔

Stephanie Staton is the former editor of Hobby Farm Home and Hobby Farms magazines.

Frozen TREAT FUN

As you prepare fruits and vegetables for treats, chop scraps into ½-inch cubes, place in a freezer bag and freeze. Cut a line across three holes in a Wiffle ball, gently squeeze the ball to open it up and empty the bag of frozen goodies into the ball. Allow the ball to close and roll or hang in the run. Empty any uneaten snacks from ball, rinse and let dry for the next play date.



PROJECT FEEDER

Take on this do-it-yourself task and construct a feeding station that noninvited guests can't eat from.

ARTICLE & PHOTOS BY STEPHANIE THUROW

We raise a small flock of hens in the backyard of the suburban home. Our setup is quite unique compared to most other chicken-keepers that I know. We have a small coop that the manufacturer says is suitable for up to five chickens, but I wouldn't keep more than four in it. We keep the coop inside of a covered steel poultry pen, so essentially the pen is

their run as well as a protective layer around the coop. It's been an incredibly safe setup for our four hens and has kept out predators such as neighborhood cats, raccoons, foxes, coyotes, opossums and birds of prey. But because the steel poultry pen has small 3-by-1-inch slats, mice and small wild birds, easily pass through the cage and help themselves to the expensive organic chicken feed that we provide our flock.





You'll need these supply to get started:

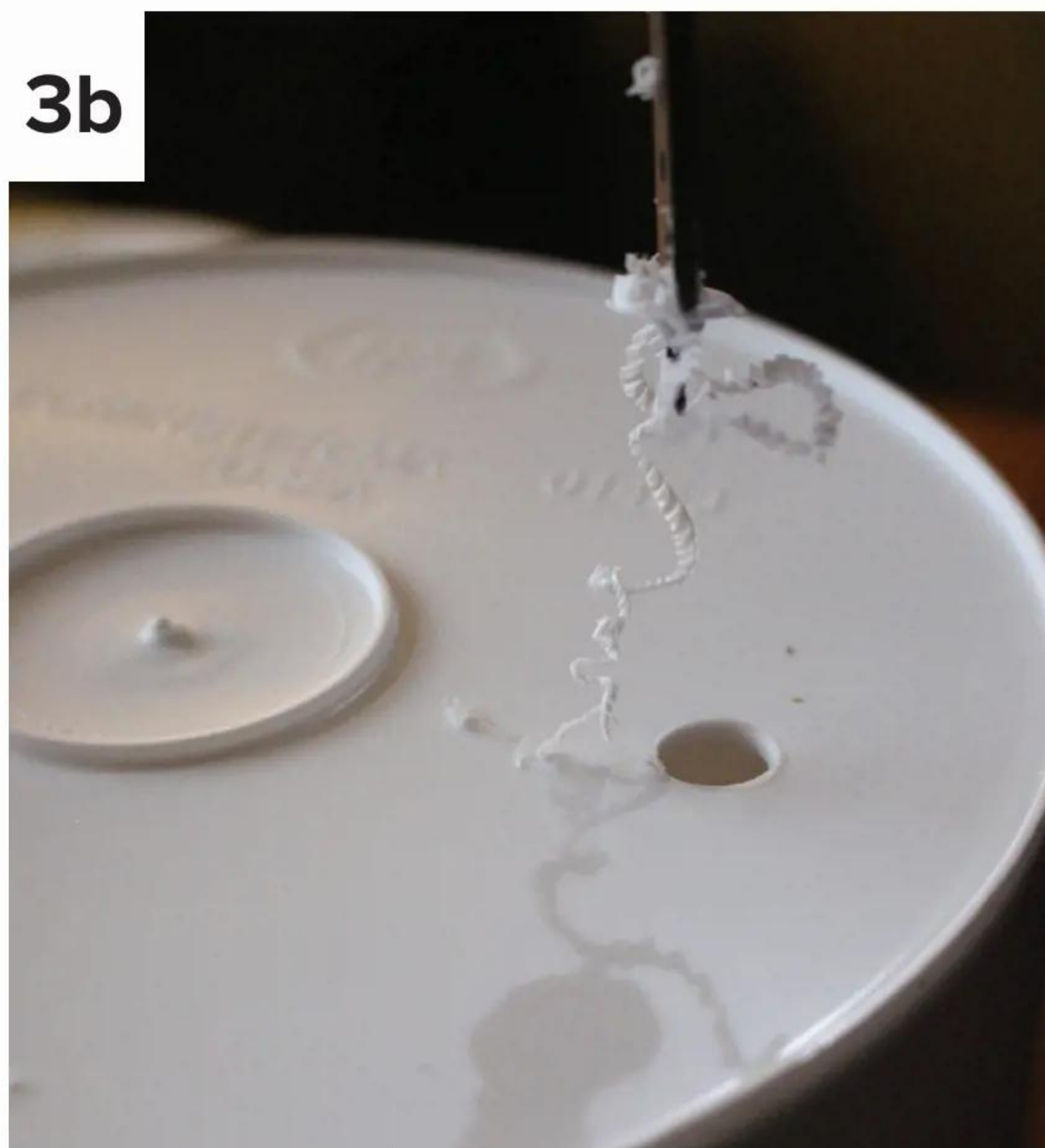
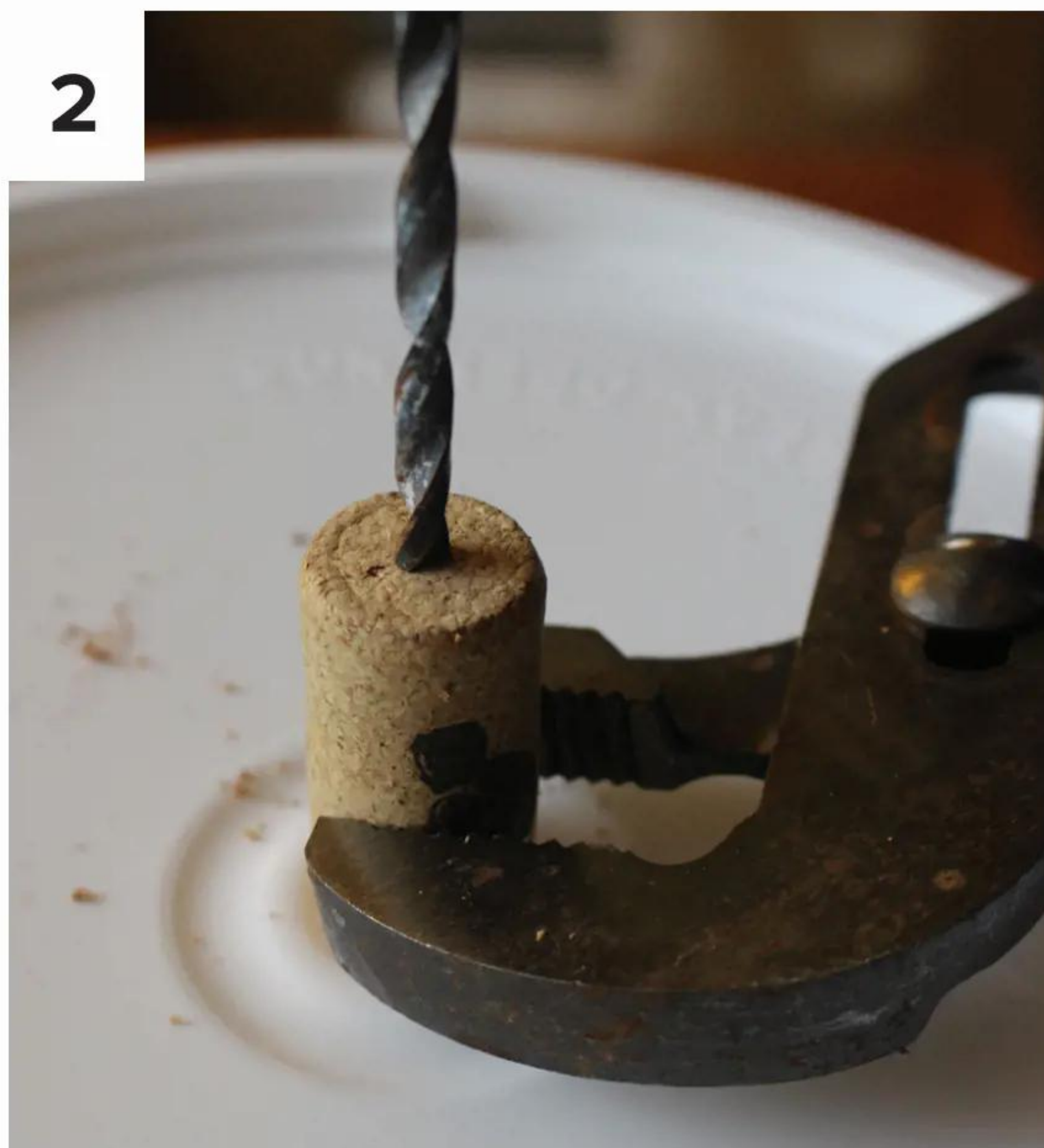
- a food-grade bucket w/lid
- a drill, 3/32-inch bit, a 1/2-inch spade bit and a 3/16-inch bit
- two corks
- pliers
- a 4-inch eyebolt with 1/4-inch diameter threads
- a chain

It took a couple of years before the wild birds, specifically the sparrows, began the takeover. I say takeover because sometimes we'll have literally 30 or more sparrows in the poultry pen at one time. The hens don't seem to mind one bit. I tried to remedy the problem by adding 1/2-inch square netting around the poultry pen, but the sparrows are smart and found little gaps to come and go from, such as the gap over the door that we cannot cover with any sort of netting.

We started filling the wild-bird feeders outside of the pen, hoping that would satisfy the little monsters. But, with bird flu being an on-and-off issue, we can't always keep the feeders full as we don't want to bring the migratory birds into our yard. Plus, those sparrows will tear through a feeder full within just a couple of hours, throwing much on the ground for the squirrels to enjoy.

There are metal poultry feeders on the market that have a treadle step that allows the chickens to step on the treadle, which will then open the feeder and allow the chickens to eat only when they are pushing down the step. This is a great option as mice and wild birds aren't heavy enough to push down the step; however, my hens are still terrified of the large metal feeder, as it takes time for them to acclimate to it. For now, it's in their run, waiting for their fear of it to dwindle.

The only solution that I seemed to come up with that made a difference was to feed the hens portions of their feed in the morning and again midday. The sparrows still came, but the hens would get the bulk of the feed. But I knew there had to be a better solution, especially because I'm not always home for two feedings. That's when I picked up a book called *Hentopia*, written by *Chickens* magazine contributor Frank Hyman.



1. Using pliers to hold the cork (not your fingers), using a $\frac{3}{32}$ -inch drill bit, drill into the center of your cork lengthwise about halfway, to create a guide for the larger drill bit.

2. Using the $\frac{3}{16}$ -inch bit, drill into the cork once more, drilling in about halfway.

3. Drill one hole at the bottom of your bucket with the $\frac{1}{2}$ -inch spade bit.

4. Drop the eye bolt into the hole of the bucket. Thread the eye bolt into the cork (this is your toggle).

5. Fill the feeder with chicken feed, snap on the lid securely. Then, hang the bucket from a durable chain in your run.

Make sure the height of the toggle is the right height for your chickens.

If you don't have a place to hang the feeder, affix it to the side wall of your run or install a post to attach it to.

His book contained a project for a home-made pest-free feeder that he originally found YouTube, and I knew I had to try making one of my own. The feeder is essentially a bucket with a lid, in which you add a toggle system so that it allows the hens to peck at the toggle, which then drops feed on the ground. This keeps wild birds and rodents from being able to access the bulk of the food inside the covered bucket.

My husband and I tailored Hyman's project to our needs and have been incredibly pleased with the outcome. I can't even admit how much money we were spending on organic chicken feed per month to essentially feed the sparrows up until we made this feeder. Shake. My. Head.

BUILD YOUR OWN PEST-FREE CHICKEN FEEDER

These supplies should easily be found at your local hardware store or big-box home-improvement store. Once all the supplies are gathered, this project will literally only take minutes to complete.

SUPPLIES NEEDED

- 1 durable food-grade bucket with tight-fitting lid. We use a 2-gallon bucket for our small flock of four.
- a drill with a $\frac{3}{32}$ -inch drill bit, a $\frac{1}{2}$ -inch spade bit and a $\frac{3}{16}$ -inch drill bit
- Two wine/champagne corks (plus, a couple extra incase one cracks while drilling)
- a pair of pliers
- One 4-inch eyebolt with $\frac{1}{4}$ -inch diameter threads (two if you want two toggles in your bucket feeder)
- a chain with hook to hang feeder from run

HOW TO MAKE A PEST-FREE CHICKEN FEEDER

1. Using pliers to hold the cork (not your fingers), using a $\frac{3}{32}$ -inch drill bit, drill into the center of your cork lengthwise about halfway, to create a guide for the larger drill bit.

2. Using the $\frac{3}{16}$ -inch bit, drill into the cork once more, drilling in about halfway.

3. Drill one hole at the bottom of your bucket with the $\frac{1}{2}$ -inch spade bit.

4. Drop eye bolt into the hole of the bucket.

5. Thread the eye bolt into the cork (this is your toggle).

6. Fill the feeder with chicken feed, snap on the lid securely.

7. Hang the bucket from a durable chain in your run. Make sure the height of the toggle is the right height for your chickens. If you do not have a place to hang the feeder, affix it to the side wall of your run or install a post to attach it to.

You can expect it to take a couple days before your flock masters the new feeder. Remove any other sources of food from the run so that they focus on the bucket system. If possible, place the bucket feeder in the same location as where their other feeder was located.

Show your chickens how it works by manipulating the toggle so that they see the food drop to the ground. My hens caught on surprisingly quickly, but the time it takes will vary from flock to flock. Hyman suggests that you take your hen's beak and tap it against the cork to teach them how to use the "vending machine" feeder. He also suggests taking a red laser pointer and shining it on the cork toggle to get the hens to peck at it.

ADDITIONAL NOTES

For a larger flock, use a larger bucket. Hyman's project in Hentopia uses a 5-gallon food-grade bucket with lid. With a larger bucket, you can install two or more toggles in the bottom of the bucket so that more than one hen can drop food at once.

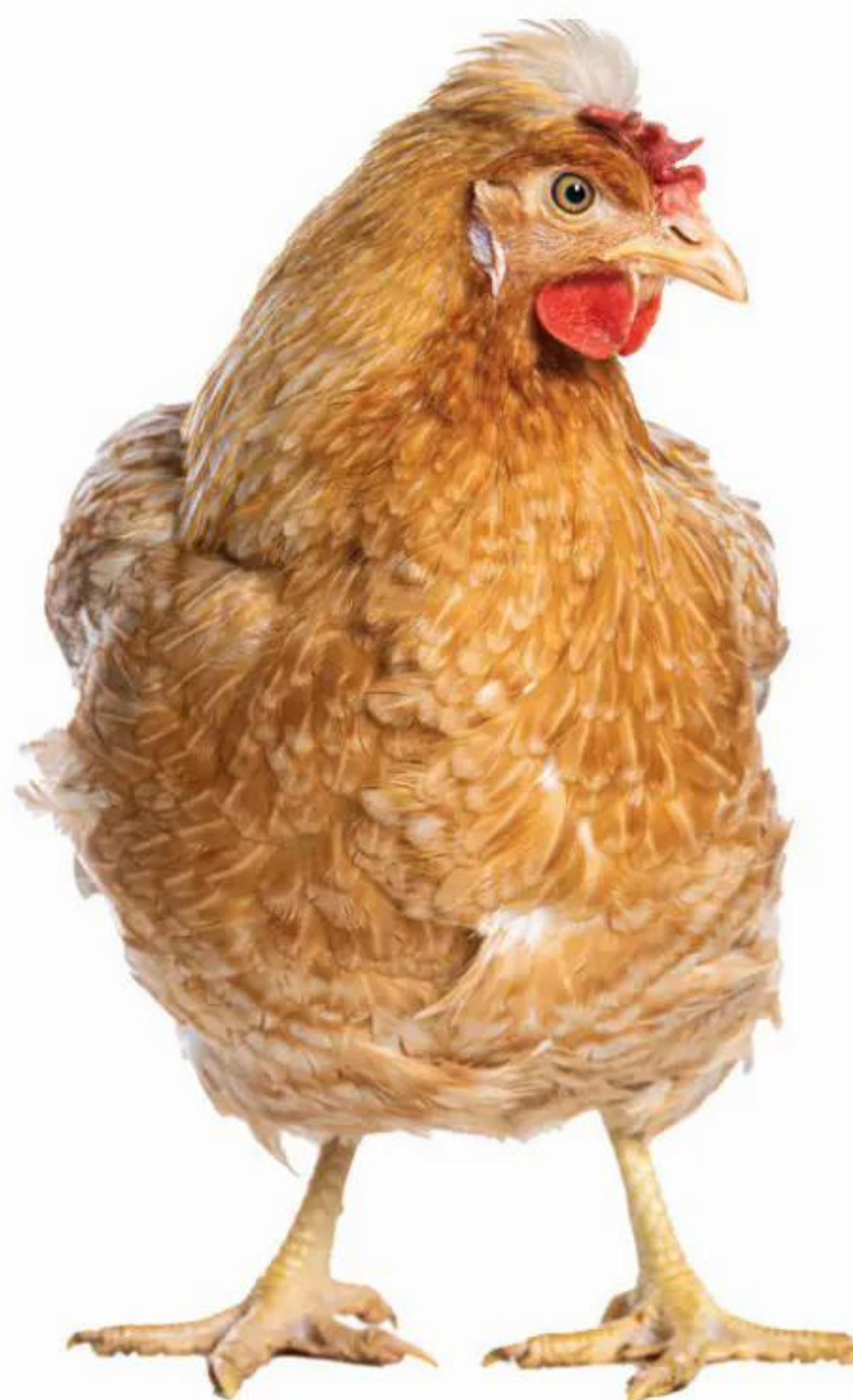
Depending on the type of feed you use (whole grain, pellets or mash), you may want to create a smaller hole for the eye bolt so that the feed doesn't just fall out when not being manipulated by the toggle. You don't want to feed pouring out of the bucket feeder when it's not in use. We use a wholegrain feed that only drops if the hens peck at the cork toggle with the measurements noted in this article.

The size of the hole you make with the spade bit and the size of the eye bolt will vary depending on the size of the feed you supply your birds with. We tried to keep our hole small enough that food drops when manipulated, but so that it would not be large enough for a mouse to fit through. Start small and make the holes bigger as needed.

FOR A CLEAN COOP

Use these tips to keep your coop and run pest-free and healthy for your flock.

- Keep your chicken feed, scratch and treats in a durable container, such as a metal





trash can with lid (and latch/lock, if you have large predators).

- Always keep chicken food and water outside of the coop.
- Remove eggs daily to avoid attracting egg-loving predators, such as snakes, rats, opossums, and skunks.
- Install motion sensor lights to help deter predators overnight. We have a solar powered motion activated light attached to our run as well as another facing the coop/run.
- Oregano, varieties of mint, rosemary, basil, lavender, sage, citronella, and thyme plants, growing around the coop and run, will help deter pests such as flies, ants, mice and rats. Using the dried or fresh versions of the aforementioned plants to sprinkle in the nesting boxes and run can also be beneficial to keeping pests away.
- Keep the coop clean and dry. With chickens having sensitive respiratory systems, it's important to keep the coop clean as the ammonia from their droppings can build up. Plus, coops cleaned on a regular basis are less likely to have infestations of parasites, mites and other pests. We

clean our coop weekly with a deeper cleaning done monthly from spring through fall.

- Be sure to keep the feeder and waterer clean. It's important for the health of your flock to provide clean water and fresh food. We keep our water dispenser elevated off the ground, hung from a chain, to avoid dirt and droppings from contaminating the water source.
- Provide a dust bath. Dust bathing is an important part of life for chickens. Provide a dirt bath option for your chickens to dust bathe in. A dust bath is comparable to a shower for humans. Dust bathing allows the chickens to clean their feathers, which helps keep mites and lice at bay. It's also a very relaxing social activity for chickens. 🐔

Stephanie Thurow is an author, certified master food preserver, food preservation instructor and writer. Her pastimes include cooking from scratch, canning, fermenting, crafting, organic gardening, chicken-keeping, fishing, traveling and urban homesteading. She loves to garden and lives with her family, pets and flock of hens on her urban homestead near Minneapolis, Minnesota.

wing tip

Keep your chickens entertained with hay/straw bales.

Straw bales of wheat give you the most bang for your buck. They encourage natural foraging behaviors, reduce aggression and improve leg health. Instead of pecking themselves or their friends, birds can spend

hours pecking and scratching through bales. However, if not deployed correctly, bales can backfire and cause more pecking and aggression among your flock. This is especially true if there is a really dominant chicken



that doesn't like to share. If you notice that your chickens are fighting too aggressively over who gets to play with the straw bale, try adding multiple straw bales and put them far away from each other.

This layout makes it difficult for dominant chickens to fight off unwanted visitors. There are too many bales to protect and too much ground to cover between bales. Eventually the dominant chicken will give up and let the others join in on the fun.

Hint: You can use the same approach with other types of environmental enrichments or toys. Straw bales can also double as platform perches and encourage your chickens to jump on and off.

This leads to better coordination and stronger leg muscles and bones.

PRO TIP

Straw bales can be used to create barriers between feeders and waterers to promote walking or jumping. Place hay bales in such a way that birds can either jump over the bales or walk in an S-shape to get to food and water. However, this should be done under careful supervision to make sure no birds go without food and water. Alternatively, you could just place food and water far away from each other to increase walking distance. 🐔



ONE COOL Coop

I hired someone to build a one-section coop with a door (bottom picture) and then ... chicken math. I added another smaller section. After that, I had just enough room on the other side (a year later) to add yet another 20-by-6-foot section with a door for easy clean out. We do the deep-litter method. Inside are three Formex Snap Lock chicken coops. I have 18 hens and 1 rooster happily clucking away. I do put a fan on the outside plugged into my nearby garage on hot days. There is no electricity to the coop itself. I haul water but keep the feed inside in metal cans. We sit outside and inside enjoying our clucks' sweet personalities. I raise Orpingtons and Wyandottes. They mix very well together. Learn from me: Go big at the start! 🐔 — Constance Kubitz, Marion, Illinois





TELL US ABOUT YOUR COOP!

Email us a short write-up (~250 to 500 words) about your chicken coop along with a few images to chickens@chickensmagazine.com with the subject line **One Cool Coop**, and include your name and mailing address.

We'll send one person a prize package of Frenzy Products (total approximate value \$60): 30-ounce Mealworm Frenzy, 30-ounce Double Frenzy and Free Range Feast Spice Blend from our sponsor, **Happy Hen Treats** (www.happyhentreets.com)!



NO PURCHASE NECESSARY TO ENTER. Contest is open to legal residents of the 50 United States or District of Columbia, age 21 or older. Entries must be received between 12:00:01 a.m. PT on 4/25/2025 and 11:59:59 p.m. PT on 6/25/2025. See Official Rules on page 64. Void where prohibited by law. Sponsor: EG Media Investments LLC

From Flock

Getting a few chickens usually leads to having a full-fledged flock, which can quickly lead to a diverse farm with all sorts of animals.

BY DEBORAH NIEMANN

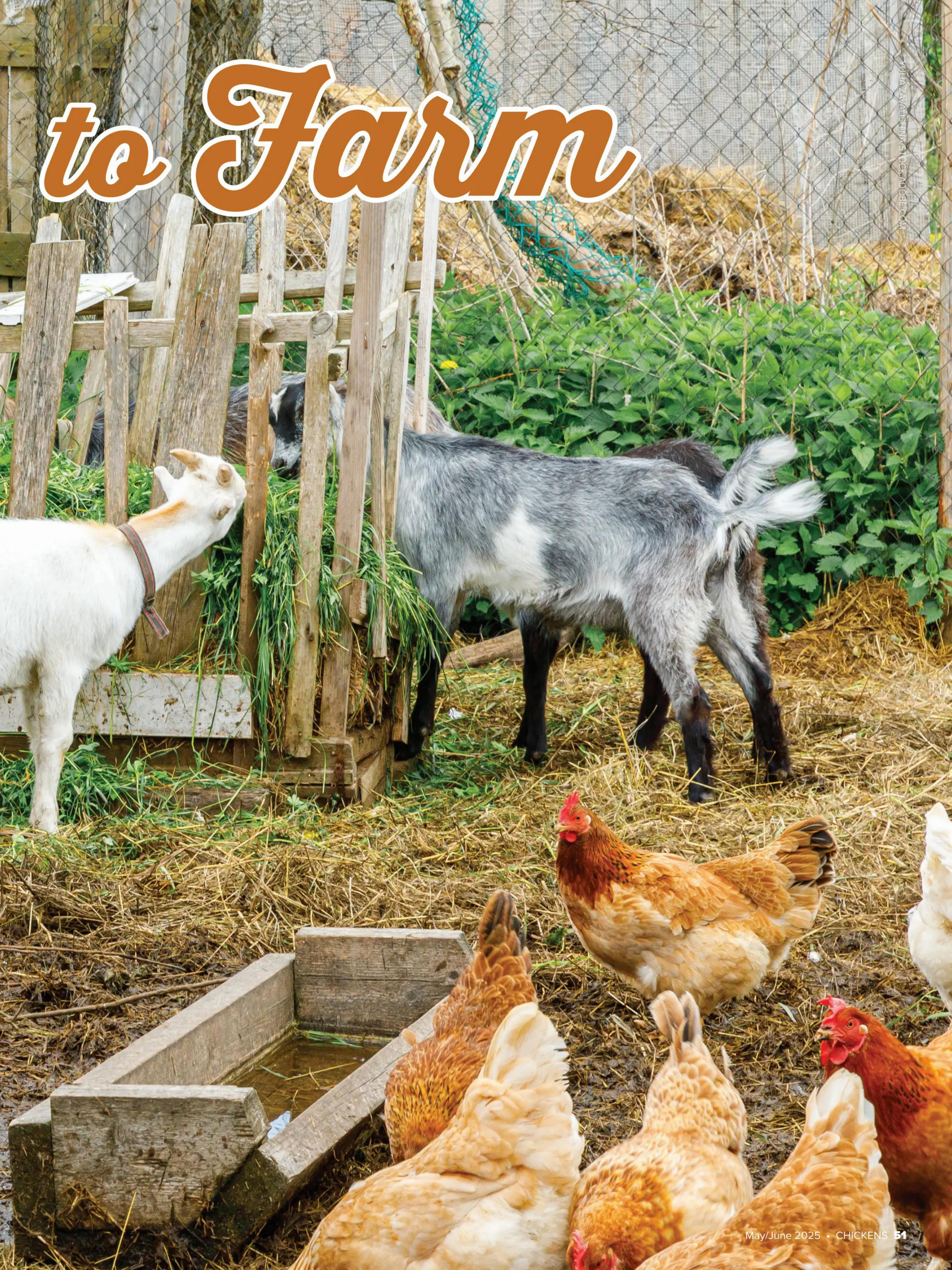


W

hen I refer to chickens as gateway livestock, people often laugh, assuming I'm joking; I'm not. After having chickens for a while and enjoying a bounty of fresh eggs, as well as the free entertainment that they provide, people start to think about adding additional livestock to their homesteads. They may want their own fresh milk to make cheese, their own wool for spinning or their own homegrown meat. Although chickens typically get along fine with other livestock, here are a few things to consider to make sure everyone stays healthy and happy.

to Farm

YULIA ZAVATSHINA/STOCKADOB.COM



Ducks, geese and chickens can coexist, if their basic needs are met with the right feed, water and conditions.



KEMEO/STOCK.ADOBE.COM

MORE ARE MERRIER

One thing to keep in mind with all livestock is that they are prey animals, which means they usually don't feel secure if they are the only one of their species. This means it isn't a good idea to have one chicken, one duck, one turkey, one sheep, one goat and one pig.

Plus, different species speak different languages: Goats rear up on their hind legs to butt heads, while sheep put their heads down to ram their opponents when they have a disagreement. Pigs simply bite. Most types of poultry ignore each other, as do sheep, goats and pigs when sharing a pasture.

Many people also worry about disease or parasite transmission between species, but it isn't overly common. There are some specific cases, but most diseases and parasites are species-specific.

- There are hundreds of types of lice, so pig lice don't infect goats or chickens and vice versa.
- There are thousands of types of roundworms. *Haemonchus contortus* is a goat and sheep worm, and if a pig eats goat or sheep feces, the worm will simply be digested in its stomach.
- There are also different strains of coccidia that infect chickens and other livestock and cause coccidiosis. You should be aware that if your chickens have access to poop from other species, they will scratch at it and eat any remnants they find of undigested grain, as well as parasites and parasite eggs. Some farmers actually use this to their advantage and

employ rotational grazing with their chickens grazing an area after other livestock so that they can eat the high-protein fly larvae and maggots that are in the poop.

OTHER POULTRY

Adding other species of poultry to your flock may seem simple because they're also birds. However, there are some significant differences to consider.

DUCKS

Other than Muscovy ducks, which spend very little time in the water, ducks should have access to a decently sized pool they're able to swim in. At a minimum, ducks need a place where they can dunk their heads regularly so they keep their faces and eyes washed.

This may not seem like a big deal until you've had ducks with your chickens for a few hours: Chickens drink and the ducks will play in water, and together, they can empty a 1-gallon waterer in 15 minutes if they want to. If you have an automatic waterer, you will have an even bigger mess.

TURKEYS

Some homesteaders like raising turkeys for holiday meals. Turkey poults initially need a starter feed with more protein than young chickens, but once they're a few months old, you can raise them together. If you have heritage-breed turkeys, however, be aware that they

may fly into trees to roost at night, so if you want them to go into the chicken coop with your hens, you need to be there near dusk to herd them into the building.

There is a lot written about turkeys getting blackhead disease, aka *histomoniasis*, when they are housed with chickens, but I have never had a problem with this. Chickens can be carriers of blackhead without getting sick, but the disease can kill turkeys. I used to think that we never had a problem because all our chicks and poults came from certified disease-free hatcheries, and we never took in rescue poultry. But after researching the disease, I realized that because our birds are free-range, they are much less likely to contract it. In fact, blackhead was not a problem until turkey production moved into buildings in the early 1900s.

The pathogen that causes the disease can't survive outside in the weather, nor can it survive turkey's stomach acid. Although turkeys can consume earthworms that act as an intermediary host for the disease, the most likely route of infection is fecal-cloacal, meaning that a turkey gets infected if it sits in infected poop. By providing roosts for your turkeys, you greatly reduce the possibility of that happening.

GUINEAFOWL

are popular among hobby farmers because they have a reputation for eliminating ticks. Although guineas do have a high need for

protein, chickens and turkeys also eat ticks. If you have nearby neighbors, they may not be happy if you get guineas, as the birds tend to be very ... talkative, I'll say. Many times, my daughter has threatened to never milk another goat if I couldn't keep the guineas out of the barn at sundown because their chattering was driving her crazy. Guineas are excellent flyers and chose to roost in the rafters or on the roof of the barn, rather than in the chicken house.

Chickens can carry a parasite that causes blackhead, a disease that adversely affects turkeys.

GOATS & SHEEP

These ruminants are great additions to chickens, as long as you keep their feed separate.



Chickens and goats share a few diseases, but *cryptosporidiosis* is the main one of concern.

MADEIRA/STOCK.ADOBE.COM



MARTIN BERGSMAN/STOCK.ADOBE.COM



LARA-SH/STOCK.ADOBE.COM

Chickens and sheep typically get along; they simply ignore each other. However, sometimes a chicken will perch on top of sheep and try to scratch through its wool.

When people say “goats eat everything,” they aren’t talking about tin cans, which is a myth. They really mean that goats eat every type of plant, from poison ivy to roses and hedges. They also love grain, so you must be sure that they don’t have access to chicken grain, which can give them diarrhea. In severe cases, it can cause enterotoxemia, goat polio or bloat, all of which can kill them.

Like goats, sheep can get sick from eating too much grain, so you must keep the chickens’ feed in an area they can’t access. Sheep aren’t quite as fond of bushes and young trees as goats are, but they can’t be trusted around flower beds.

Because goats can jump, you’ll need to have multiple boards or a piece of plywood to block their entry into the coop. You need to figure out how high to place the wood based upon how high they can jump, but assume they can jump at least as high as their head. To keep sheep out of the coop, you’ll need to block their access, as you would with goats. Sheep’s jumping ability, however, is somewhere between a pig’s and a goat’s.

PIGS

Unlike ruminants that get sick after eating too much grain, pigs can pig out and be perfectly fine. Although eating your chickens’ grain won’t make a pig sick, the pig won’t leave any grain for the chickens, and they’ll probably destroy your chicken feeder in the process.

Pigs will also happily eat any eggs that your hens lay on the ground or in nest boxes that are within their reach. Pigs can be kept out of your chicken coop if you nail a board across the door about a foot off the ground. Pigs are not good jumpers, so this usually works.

Pigs are omnivores and larger breeds of pigs have a reputation for killing and eating chickens.



AHAVELAR/STOCK.ADOBE.COM

Pigs have been known to kill and eat chickens that wander into their pens.



Chickens will eat any feed that the cows have dropped and peck through cow manure looking for larvae.

The smaller breeds, which are usually culled for poor temperament, don't normally do this. In fact, my American Guinea Hogs will let my chickens eat grain from their feed pans, and my chickens have even been seen walking on my boar when he's laying in the pasture.

Keep Feed Away

If you have four-legged livestock, you need to keep them out of your chicken feed, but how do you do that? The simplest solution is to keep the grain in the chicken coop and to keep other livestock out of there. This is also a good idea because if goats or other animals walk under the roosts when chickens are on them, they can wind up with chicken poop on their backs.

If you can't keep them out of your chicken coop, you can use a hanging feeder and attach it to a pulley. We've used this system for years. We leave the chickens in the coop until about 8 a.m. and use the pulley to raise the feeder high enough that the other livestock can't reach it. Then, we open the coop. This also encourages the chickens to try harder when it comes to foraging for food during the day.

When we lock up the other animals in the barn for the night, we lower the feeder so that the chickens can have the grain again. Knowing that they will get grain also encourages them to come into the coop at night.

CATTLE

Adding a milk cow or a few feeder calves to a homestead is a fairly advanced undertaking because of the size of the animals, but they get along beautifully with chickens and other poultry. Although cattle mostly ignore poultry, chickens love scratching through cow pies looking for fly eggs, maggots and undigested grain. In fact, some people use chickens in movable pens to follow cattle in a rotational grazing pattern for this reason. The chickens are moved to the cattle pasture a few days after the cattle so that the fly eggs have a chance to hatch, creating more protein-rich maggots.

Like goats and sheep, cattle are ruminants and shouldn't have access to the coop because they'll eat the grain, which could upset their rumen and make them sick. However, they would have to eat a lot of grain for that to be a problem. The bigger issue is that the chickens would be left with no grain.

A hundred years ago, almost all farms were diversified, and chickens lived in harmony with other livestock and vice versa. By arming yourself with a little knowledge, you can successfully add other livestock to your hobby-farm flock. 🐔

*Deborah Niemann lives on 32 acres in the middle of Illinois with her husband and a mixed flock of poultry, as well as goats, sheep and pigs. They produce their meat, eggs, dairy products and maple syrup. She is the author of *Homegrown and Handmade*, *Ecothrifty* and *Raising Goats Naturally*, all from New Society Publishers.*

wing tip

Chicken coops can be magnets for rats and mice.

Rodents are predators of chickens and eggs, and they can carry and transmit diseases.



Rodents are responsible for more than a quarter of all farm fires of unknown origin, but the main risk from infestations is feed contamination and disease exposure to you and your flock. A rat can produce more than 40 droppings per day and a gallon or more of urine per year, while a single mouse can produce more than 80 droppings per day and more than a quart of urine per year. A variety of human and livestock diseases are spread through contact with rodent excrement, which include cryptosporidiosis, toxoplasmosis, leptospirosis, brucellosis and salmonellosis.

Rats can also become predatory, killing and feeding on adult chickens, but they can be especially hard on young chicks. As a professional wildlife control operator and hobby farmer for years, I've personally witnessed rat infestations that consumed hundreds of day-old chicks within a couple nights. Because rodents are mainly nocturnal feeders, it's easy to seriously underestimate their numbers and impact on your coop.

Here are a few steps to take to minimize a rodent problem around your chickens.

1. CLEAN THE COOP

Keeping the area around the chickens' coop tidy will help deter rodents, especially rats, by leaving them without a place to set up house. Make sure grass around your coop is always cut neatly, and remove any scrap lumber or brush piles that are near the area. Throw away empty feed bags or store away for future use; don't let them pile up outside the door.

2. BUILD BARRIERS

Repair doors and floors to help restrict access to the chicken coop. Total exclusion might not be practical for larger operations, but backyard chicken-keepers will find benefits to it. Mice squeeze through an opening the size of a person's little finger.

If possible, line the corners of small, elevated coops and chicken tractors, especially where walls and floors meet, with sheet metal or ¼-inch mesh hardware cloth. It's best if this is done from the outside to prevent rodents from chewing an entry point through the wood.

3. STORE FEED PROPERLY

Chicken feed should always be stored in a covered metal container. Heavy, industrial drums that have been thoroughly cleaned are best at keeping out rodents. Drums come in 30- and 55-gallon sizes and can often be purchased from farm-supply dealers. A simple metal trashcan works as an alternative if you don't have access to drums. Make sure the container's cover fits tight; otherwise, rats and mice will scale walls to jump into the container.

Also remove the chickens' waterer from the area at night when they roost. Rodents often show up in droves in late summer, especially if it's been hot and dry, looking for moisture. Be sure to replace with fresh water in the morning.

4. SET SNAP TRAPS

If you find yourself with a rodent infestation, the best remedy is to physically remove them. Traditional snap traps can be very effective for both mice and rats; however, you will want to keep them out of reach of your chickens. Most hardware stores sell trap/poison containment boxes. These boxes typically hold a couple traps, protecting them from anything that can't enter the small entrance hole.

Rodents naturally concentrate their travels against walls, so these boxes or stations should be placed in their natural lines of travel. The entrance hole should be parallel and closest to the wall. Bait can be used, but it isn't absolutely necessary in this situation. Traditional baits, such as peanut butter or chocolate, will work fine.

Larger boxes and traps can be placed around the perimeter of the coop to catch rats looking for a meal. Rats are extremely wary of anything new in their territory and might avoid the boxes until they get used to them. In this case, the boxes should be installed a couple weeks before putting the traps in them to help overcome their natural wariness.

5. SET COLONY TRAPS

Colony traps are multicatch traps, meaning they can hold more than one mouse at a time. The small metal boxes have an entrance hole on either end that contains a one-way door, meaning mice enter and can't get out. The nice part about them is they're on duty 24/7 without maintenance, except removing trapped mice. Again, no bait is needed if placed against the wall in the normal travel route. All mice caught

in a colony trap will be alive if you check them frequently, so you will need a plan for dealing with them. Mice are not at all wary of these devices and will enter them readily.

Colony traps for rats are like small cages. Again, the rats will hesitate entering them at first. My experience is once one finally goes in, they all go, but it might take days or even weeks.

6. APPLY RODENTICIDES

Poisons are often a last resort and should be used with caution around your livestock or poultry. Always place poisons in containment boxes; in most areas, this is the only legal way to use them. Make sure the boxes are locked in some manner. Many of them snap shut and require a tool to open, while others need to be locked with a screw or similar fastener. This will keep them from opening and exposing the contents to nontarget animals.

I prefer poison blocks over pellets, as blocks can be fastened to the inside of the box and are more difficult for rodents to remove. Pellets can easily be removed from the boxes, which is hazardous to your flock.

When using any rodenticide, it's important not to continually use the same one over and over, as rodents will eventually build up an immunity to the chemicals. If a rodent snacks on a poison block and gets a bellyache and then recovers, it's now immune to that particular cocktail, so it's important to change it up frequently. It's also important to keep the boxes maintained — don't run out of poison — and keep them well fed.

Be aware of secondary poisoning to domestic animals, such as cats and dogs, and in wildlife that might consume poisoned rodents. Secondary poisoning is rare, but it can happen.

7. CALL A PROFESSIONAL

If you find yourself overwhelmed or simply just don't want to deal with the mess of rodents, search the Internet to find a professional in your area; social media is a great place to ask for referrals. PestWorld.org is a website operated by the National Pest Management Association that allows you to search for pest professionals in and near your ZIP code. 🐾

Mike Wilhite is a freelance writer/editor, hobby farmer and wildlife control operator, who specializes in snakes, small mammals and predators. Wilhite lives in Scandinavia, Wisconsin.

Save Your Grass

Your green yard doesn't have to become a brown field just because you raise chickens; you can keep a flock and have a nice lawn, too.

BY RACHEL HURD ANGER

When we were expecting baby chicks, we received plenty of discouraging criticism. One was a warning that chickens would ruin our yard, second to the myth that chickens are dirty. The comments came most often from well-meaning people who still bemoan their mid-century farm chores, when chicken keeping was still part of basic rural survival — far different than what raising chickens can be today.

We are no doubt raising a little rural charm in our backyards, but the mode is different: Our chickens are pets, often named, and they're expected to live for many years. We also provide better healthcare and personal attention. Most importantly, we don't keep too many of them.

Nonetheless, chickens can do a number on your yard if you're not careful. Here are some tips for keeping your yard intact while still enjoying your backyard flock.

NICK BEER/STOCK.ADOBE.COM





Too many chickens in a small space with turn a lawn brown from too much scratching, pecking and “fertilizing.” Try to let your flock free-range in different spots of the yard.

1. AVOID POLLUTION

A small flock of backyard chickens love to eat grass, but it’s impossible for them to eat an entire yard of it. What destroys grass is the high nitrogen content in fresh chicken poop. In the small confines of a chicken run, the swift layering buildup of chicken poop smothers and chemically burns the grass, obliterating anything growing in a new run within a week.

Alternatively, a small amount of chicken poop is an effective fertilizer. Free-ranging a flock evenly distributes chicken poop throughout the yard, making it the cleanest chicken-keeping method of all, with no toxic buildup anywhere. Of course, you still need to clean the coop regularly.

The solution to pollution is dilution: Consider diluting your chickens with an abundance of space to avoid toxic buildup of waste. Large waste can be picked up and composted, or diluted and washed away with a spray of the hose if you prefer. Small waste deposits can be left alone.

2. RESPECT THE LIMITS OF YOUR SPACE

Free-ranging to avoid chicken waste buildup and toxic spaces doesn’t give us permission to fill our yards with even more chickens.

Raising too many chickens in a backyard will destroy your yard, just like well-meaning former farm kids will tell you of their own larger-scale farming experiences. Raise too many chickens for your space, and your yard will transform into a predictable farm-shade of brown; but raise just the right amount of chickens for your space, and you’ll still be seeing green.

Chicken ordinances in cities and towns usually allow for raising a specific number of chickens within a certain area of space. Many ordinances require that chickens must be raised in confinement for hygienic purposes. Unfortunately, even in a spacious coop and run, the chicken waste is concentrated in their small living area.

If this space isn’t kept tidy, it can become a toxic and dangerous place for the chickens to live. A toxic, filthy coop breeds disease within a flock, and the coop will become a stinky nuisance for neighbors.

While well meaning, ordinances can promote the very problems they’re trying to protect your neighbors from. Chicken spaces do have an odor, but it’s not decidedly bad. However, chicken spaces, coops and yard areas should never stink simply because chickens are living there.



Your chickens will be happy to have a nice yard in which to free-range, forage and search for snacks, insects, worms and bits of lawn clippings.

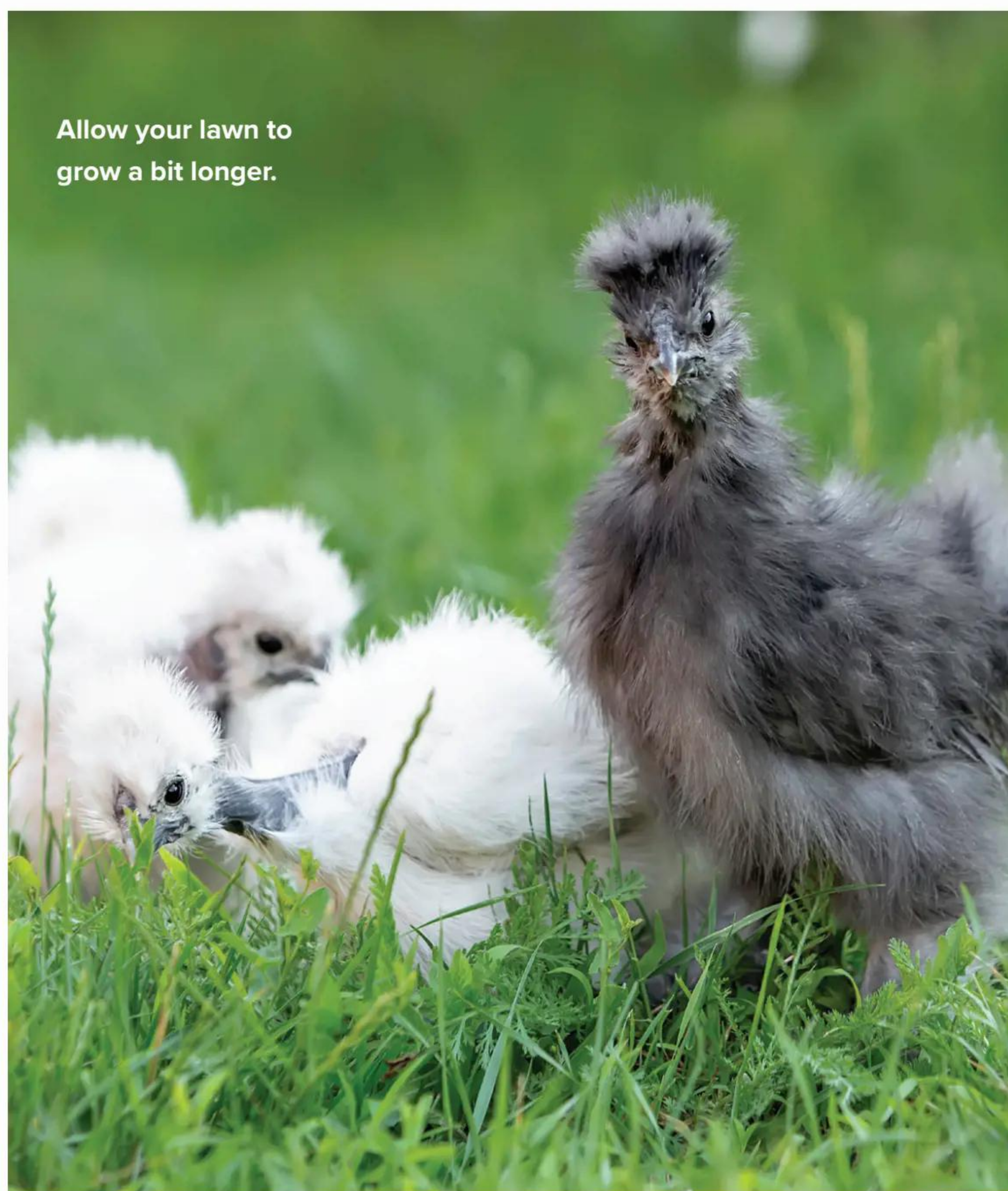
When choosing the number of chickens you will raise, be conservative until you know how a handful of adult hens will affect your coop, your yard and your neighbors. Starting small will give you a sense of how well you can keep up with cleaning their spaces, too. In the long run, this will save your grass.

3. LET GRASS GROW

Keeping the lawn a little longer will help protect it from the high nitrogen content in chicken waste. Short grass, on the other hand, is already prone to drying out, making it even more vulnerable to chicken destruction.

When you do mow the lawn, consider mulching instead of picking up the clippings. When grass is picked up, chickens will munch on the tasty, trimmed grass, scratching at the roots as they do. Because chickens prefer easier work when it's available, mulched clippings offers instant gratification, and they will kick clippings around as they snack, instead of scratching directly at the ground. 🐔

Rachel Hurd Anger is an urban farming writer with interests in biodiversity and the elimination of food insecurity. She lives with her family, pets and small flock of hens in Louisville, Kentucky.



Allow your lawn to grow a bit longer.

The Surprise Chick

My grandparents introduced me to the amazing world of chickens when I was 10. They bought some baby chicks for me after my beloved childhood dog died. Over the next several years, I have made many wonderful chicken-related memories, such as when our big New Jersey Giant rooster, Ichabod, chased me and my friends, the joy of being greeted by the whole flock and the relaxing comfort of chicken chatter. Chickens have taught me so much, like the important lesson of the circle of life. The memory closest to my heart is the story of my surprise chick.

EXTRA, EXTRA!

I had convinced my grandparents to order a small number of chicks for my birthday and was pleased when the hatchery included an extra chick. This little yellow chick was covered with fuzz, even on its feet. As the surprise chick grew, its feathers made its legs look thick. Watching it run was funny. It looked like a Bulldozer plowing and chugging along. Bulldozer was a funny name, and it stuck.

Bulldozer
plowed and
chugged his
way around,
leading to his
unique name.



Leilani and Bulldozer were a lovely pair.

I hoped this chicken would be a hen, but that was not the case. My hopes were dashed when he began to make this weird sound. It wasn't the usual cock-a-doodle-doo; nope, it sounded more like an owl/loon combination.

I didn't plan to bond with a chicken after the sudden loss of a beloved hen, but Bulldozer's uniqueness from his crow, beautiful orange feathers and personality stuck out to me. I had never bonded with a rooster before and found myself seeing a different side of roosters. Bulldozer was laid-back, letting me pick him up and take him on four-wheeler rides. He liked to dance around me and make his clucking sounds even if I didn't have food for him.

My grandparents had too many roosters and decided to surprise me by bringing Bulldozer to my house. I was thrilled I could keep him and didn't have to worry about him going to another farm. After adjusting to his new surroundings and independence, we thought he could use some company. We added two other roosters that I had incubated and helped raise on my grandparents' farm, turning my small yard into a bachelor pad. It took a little time, but they all got along together and shared the house my dad made for them.



FAMILY AFFAIR

Having Bulldozer in my own yard meant I could spend time with him every day, increasing our bond. After work he would greet me with his unusual call, prancing around me with joy as he waited for a treat. I often spent time reading in the yard or garage together with my dog, Molly, and Bulldozer. My dad was also very attached to him and even let Bulldozer ride with him on his lawnmower (pictured above). He was such a doll, and I thankfully have many photographs of him.

For no apparent reason, the other two roosters started fighting with Bulldozer. We had to separate them, and even after trying to reintroduce them, they still fought Bulldozer. It was like they could sense a weakness or something. Then, as unexpectedly as Bulldozer had arrived in my life, he suddenly passed away.

My dad had let the roosters out and saw Bulldozer having a seizure. This was a big shock to us both. My dad, who had experienced great trauma in his younger life under the



Bulldozer even got along with the family dog, Molly.



Bulldozer was laidback and would even go on four-wheeler rides.

Khmer Rouge war, was crying over this beautiful creature's sudden death. I had work that day, and although I was in shock, I went. I had to block the sounds of my dad's grief and bury my feelings to get through the day. My dad made a coffin for Bulldozer and buried him when I got home. It was so sad, especially not knowing what caused him to die.

Not having Bulldozer's presence in our lives or greeting us as we came home was so difficult. I have experienced pet deaths before, but this one seemed to be a bit more difficult. I believe loving and losing Bulldozer will help me be somewhat prepared when it's my grandparents' time. I don't know if I'll ever have a connection such as Bulldozer's again, but I still love the chickens in my life. They teach us so much about ourselves and them.

Bulldozer could've died many times throughout his short life, and I'm grateful for the time we had him. No one could have guessed that my surprise chick would become my best friend and a beloved family pet. 🐔

Leilani Heng resides in Whitefield, New Hampshire.

Tell Us Your Story!

Email the story of your flock in ~750 words to chickens@chickensmagazine.com (subject line: Chicken Chat). Be sure to include high-resolution images of yourself, your chickens and/or your coop.

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Swollen Abdomens

A swollen abdomen in chickens could be a symptom of any number of illnesses or health issues, several of which directly or indirectly affect the hen’s reproductive system. In veterinary medicine, there is rarely one cause of a condition, so we usually begin with a list of differential diagnoses and use lab tests and physical exams to differentiate. With this in mind, your best course of action is to reach out to your county-extension poultry personnel or veterinarian for help in differentiating the various causes of a swollen abdomen in chickens. Veterinarians can perform a physical exam and run diagnostic tests, including X-rays, to distinguish between fluid and solid contents in the abdominal cavity. Read more at: www.hobbyfarms.com/6-causes-of-swollen-abdomen-in-chickens

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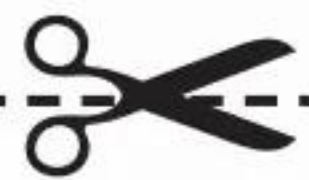


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IN THE KITCHEN

recipe & photo by Lori Rice

Buttermilk Ranch CHICKEN

Spatchcocked (butterflied) chicken is given a double dose of flavor in this recipe. First, the chicken is marinated in a mix of buttermilk and fresh herbs to tenderize the meat and add bright flavor. Then, it's rubbed with dried herbs to intensify the taste of ranch in each bite. This chicken can be grilled or roasted, making it a year-round meal.

SERVINGS: 4

INGREDIENTS

- 3 cups buttermilk
- 2 cloves garlic, minced
- 3 teaspoons salt
- 1 tablespoon chopped fresh chives
- 1 tablespoon chopped fresh dill
- 1 tablespoon chopped fresh parsley
- ¼ teaspoon ground black pepper
- 1 whole chicken, spatchcocked (about 4 pounds)
- 1 teaspoon dried chives
- 1 teaspoon dried dill
- ½ teaspoon garlic powder
- ½ teaspoon onion powder
- ½ teaspoon dried parsley
- chopped fresh dill for garnish, optional

PREPARATION

In a bowl, stir together the buttermilk, minced garlic, 2 teaspoons of the salt, fresh chives, fresh dill, fresh parsley, and black pepper.

In a 9-by-13-inch pan or a container large enough to hold it and the marinade, place the chicken breast-side up. Pour the buttermilk marinade over the chicken. Flip the chicken so it's breast-side down. Spoon the marinade over

the chicken. Cover with a lid or plastic wrap, and refrigerate for at least 4 hours, up to 12 hours.

While the chicken marinates: In a small bowl, create a dry rub by stirring together the remaining teaspoon of salt, dried chives, dried dill, garlic powder, onion powder and dried parsley.

Remove the chicken from the refrigerator about 30 minutes before you are ready to cook it, and let it sit at room temperature. Lift it out of the marinade, and use paper towels to dab the chicken and remove any excess buttermilk.

Rub the chicken over and under the skin with the dry rub.

To roast: Preheat the oven to 425 degrees Fahrenheit. Place the chicken breast-side up on a baking sheet or in a roasting pan. Bake for 45 to 50 minutes, until the internal temperature is 160 to 165 degrees and the chicken is golden brown. (The temperature will continue to rise while it rests.) Let rest for 10 minutes before serving. Garnish with chopped fresh dill.

To grill: Preheat the grill to 400 to 425 degrees, lighting only one side of the grill to create indirect heat. Grill the chicken on the side of the grill without the burner on. Grill the chicken breast-side down for 5 to 10 minutes, until seared. Flip the chicken, and grill breast-side up for 40 to 50 more minutes, until the internal temperature is 160 to 165 degrees.

Let rest for 10 minutes before serving. Garnish with chopped fresh dill. 🍴

Lori Rice is a writer, photographer and nutritional scientist. Her current passion is small-scale food production. Find her portfolio at www.loririce.com.



Shutterclucks



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DANIELLE RHOADES
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General Store

Bring the chickens inside with rooster, hen and chic(k) décor.

compiled by Sarah E. Coleman





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THE *truth* ABOUT...

What's it really like keeping Dutch Booted Bantam, Japanese Bantam, Polish and Marans chickens?

BY ANA HOTALING

If you're looking to start or expand your backyard flock but not sure which chicken breeds to are the best, I can help! While I can't tell you which ones would be the perfect match for your particular situation — more than a dozen factors affecting your decision come to mind off the top of my head — I can share which chicken breeds worked for my family and which ones crashed and burned.

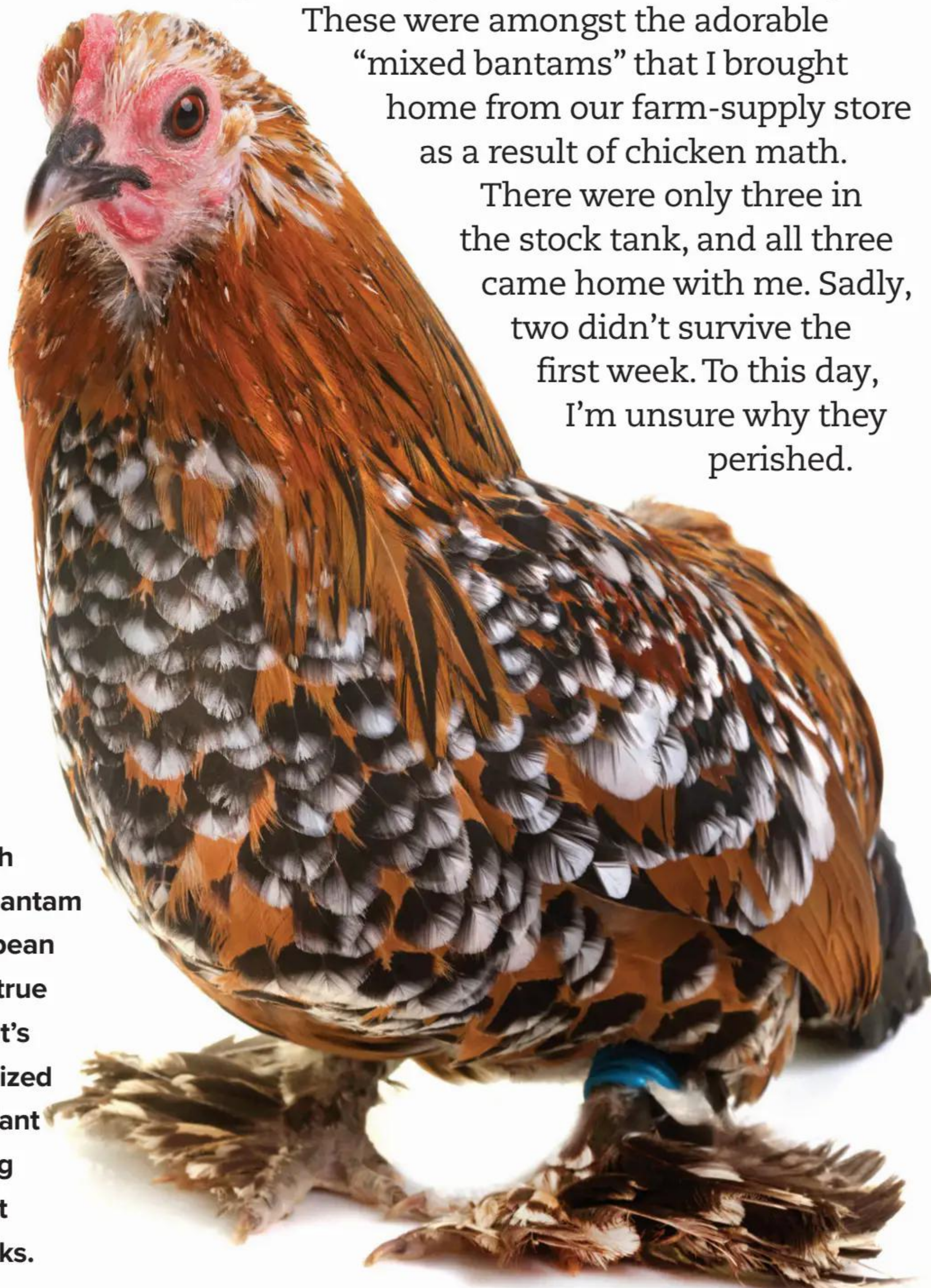
The following foursome comprise part three of my 2025 series honestly recounting my experience rearing these breeds of chicken.

DUTCH BOOTED BANTAM

My experience with Dutch Booted Bantams (pictured left) came about unexpectedly.

These were amongst the adorable “mixed bantams” that I brought home from our farm-supply store as a result of chicken math.

There were only three in the stock tank, and all three came home with me. Sadly, two didn't survive the first week. To this day, I'm unsure why they perished.



The Dutch Booted Bantam is a European breed of true bantam. It's characterized by abundant feathering on its feet and shanks.

They'd been active; were eating and drinking; were pooping; never experienced pasty butt; and were the same size and age as the other baby bantams in the brooder. Perhaps Dutch Booted Bantams are delicate by nature. Perhaps it was just those particular chicks from that particular hatchery. I'll never know.

The surviving chick, Clarice, befriended the only lavender chick I'd seen in the mixed-bantams tank (and, of course, brought home). Edward and Clarice became inseparable, even as fully grown birds ... which was all the more astounding since we discovered that Edward was not a bantam at all but rather an Easter Egger — and female at that. Another name change became imminent when Clarice began crowing.

Edwina and Clarence were quite the pair. Clarence would ride on Edwina's back, and the two would roost together at night, Clarence often tucked beneath one of Edwina's wings.

I never saw another Dutch Booted Bantam chick amongst the bantams bin that year or in subsequent years, so I can only assume that the hatchery had issues with the breed. It's hard to summarize an entire breed based on my experience with Clarence, but I will say he was a very gentle, affectionate and healthy little bird with beautiful feathering on his feet. Hopefully the rest of his breed follows suit.

JAPANESE BANTAM

One advantage of getting to know the director of the local university's poultry research farm is being alerted when hatching eggs and chicks were available for the many different chicken breeds being raised at the center. I carefully brought home one dozen of the tiniest bantam eggs I'd ever seen and watched them incubate with anticipation.

I was very disappointed when only one egg hatched. I learned soon after that Japanese Bantams, like Araucanas, carry a lethal gene that kills many of the embryos before they hatch.

The surviving chick, a gorgeous White Japanese Bantam I named Hanako, was an

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absolutely perfect specimen of the breed, with a full breast, upright tail and perfect single comb. Fully grown, he fit on the palm of my hand. I'd read that Japanese Bantams were trusting, friendly birds that made great pets. Hanako was exactly that.

I'd also read that Japanese Bantams are often picked on by other chicken breeds because of their relatively immense tail and very short legs. While none of my other bantams ever bothered Hanako, they also didn't befriend him, leaving the little fellow alone and lonely. He became very attached to me and happily rode around on my shoulder. At night, he snuggled in his own brooder with a plush bunny I bought him for company.

I also bought a small chicken tractor so that Hanako could safely enjoy the outdoors during warmer months. His tiny legs would never outrun a bullying bird, much less a predator.

While he seemed to enjoy the sunshine and the grass, Hanako never appeared to be fully comfortable outdoors. Japanese Bantams are ornamental, bred to be pets, exhibition birds or fanciers' fowl. Hanako was at his happiest whenever he was with or near me.

You need look no further than a Japanese Bantam if you're looking for the perfect pet.

Just be sure you buy yours as baby chicks to avoid the hatching heartache, and be prepared to offer your Japanese Bantams a clean, cozy brooder inside your home or basement, as the breed does poorly in the cold or intense heat. The Japanese Bantams at the university research facility lived in their own climate-controlled room indoors.

POLISH

These adorable mop tops first caught my eye on a friend's Facebook page. She had decided to focus her small-farm flock on Polish and was sharing photos of the different varieties of this striking crested bird. I had only ever seen Polish chicks once at our feed store. A special chick order had arrived and the owner had not yet picked up her trio of White-Crested Black babies.

With their fluffy poofs on top of their heads and their sweet little faces, the Polish chicks made my heart melt. My friend was only happy to oblige me. She sent me one dozen hatching eggs from her breeder stock. In three weeks' time, my husband and I were the proud parents of a dozen Golden Laced, White-Crested Black, White-Crested Blue, Buff and White Polish chicks.

Japanese Bantams make nice pets or show birds.



A Polish sports a tidy pom-pom hairdo, while a rooster will have an untidy mop of feathers.

As the chicks grew, it became very easy to tell the boys from the girls. The girls' crests were rounded pompoms while the boys resembled Andy Warhol with their eye-covering shag. I'd read that the crests tend to obscure these chickens' eyesight, making them startle easily and prone to bullying and predation. Since they had their own coop, our Polish had no bullies to worry about.

Thanks to our network of roosters, the Polish were always alerted to the presence of any predators. The only thing I could therefore put to the test was the startle factor, and only once did I ever see any of the Polish jump; our White-Crested Black rooster, Stefanski, when a blue racer suddenly slithered across his path. Heck, I'd jump, too.

Our Polish hens were decent layers, producing an average of three white eggs per week. They never went broody nor did they show any inclinations towards parenting younger members of the flock.

In addition to being our only white egg layers, the Polish were also the only breed never to display pecking-order squabbles. They were very mellow birds with sweet dispositions who got along well with each other and with us. Neither the males nor

females minded being picked up. They just took it all in stride. Since many of our Polish became prizewinning exhibition birds, their mellow, agreeable nature was a definite bonus.

The one drawback I can think of is that the poor boys' crests suffered during our frigid Michigan winters, becoming coated in thin layers of ice that I'd have to thaw. Even then, they'd stand patiently and let me wrap them in towels without complaint.

Polish chickens are truly pleasant in nature and beautiful to boot. Definitely one of my top five chicken breeds.

MARANS

Our quest for dark-brown egg layers led us to the Marans, a French bird named after the city of Marans, France. This breed's eggs range in color from milk chocolate to almost black. Marans breeders actually have an egg color ratings chart specific to the breed. Only those hens who consistently lay eggs a certain shade of brown or darker are considered to be true Marans. Those girls unfortunate enough to lay paler eggs are never bred or, worse, are culled.

I located a breeder about an hour to the northwest who specialized in Blue Copper Marans and Black Copper Marans. I brought



Marans hens will lay different shades of eggs in the same year. The shell color appears darker during the late fall and winter when cooler temperatures exist.

home four pullet chicks of each plus a Black Copper Marans cockerel. From the start, the Marans were inquisitive, active birds. They loved to range, traveling in a pack around our acreage, exploring and getting to know their territory.

Their coop had the largest run of all our hen houses, but the Marans were visibly unhappy confined. They always returned to their shelter to lay, the girls taking turns in the nest boxes while the rooster paced in the run. Once the day's eggs were produced, they'd all head off again, returning before sunset to roost for the night. I could almost set my watch to our Marans' routine. They were very predictable birds, and I'm surprised none of the local predators ever caught onto this.

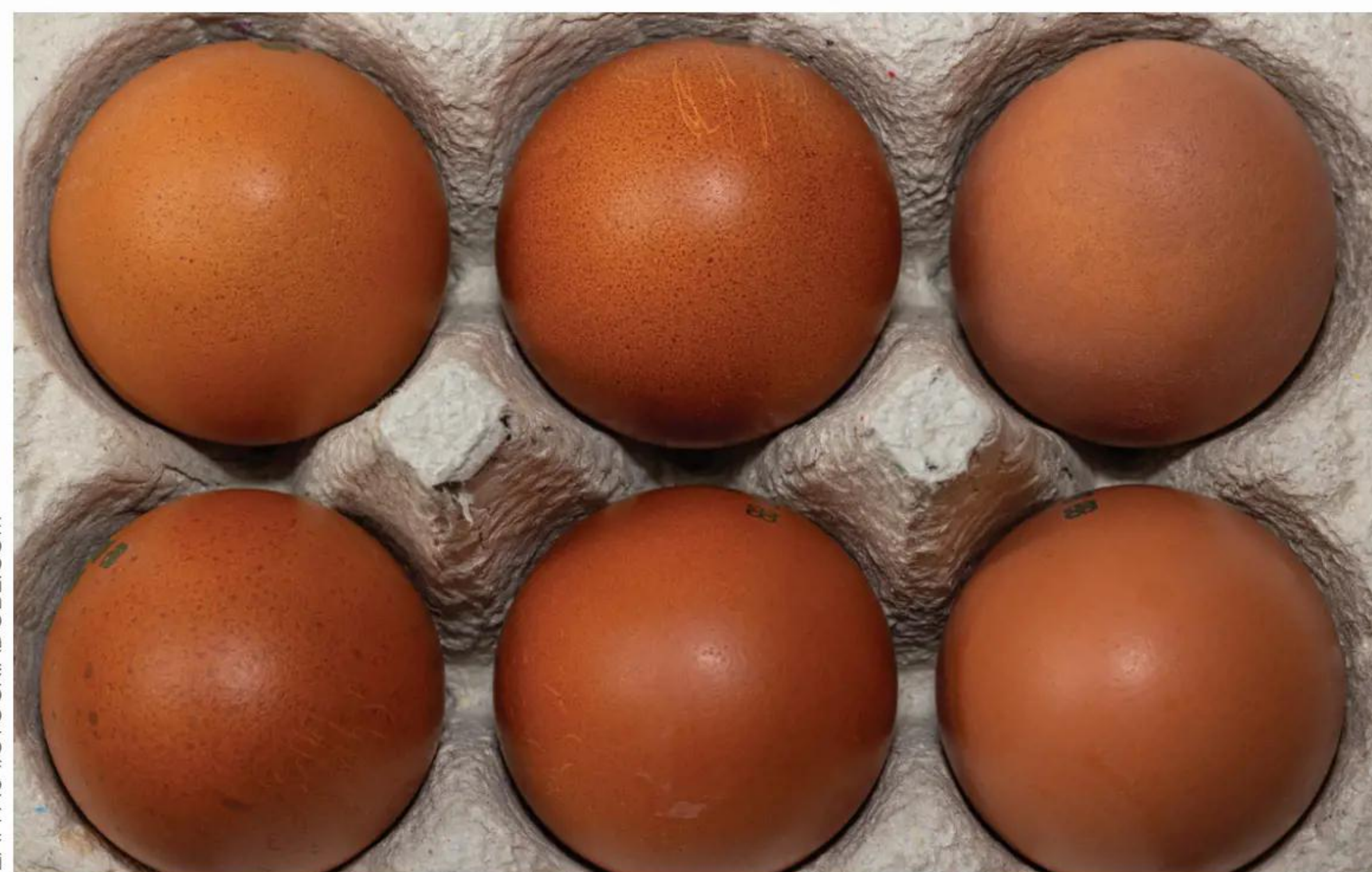
Despite laying four to five eggs per week, the Marans hens never showed any interest in setting their eggs. They were much more interested in roaming the yard. Although they were always friendly in their interactions with me, it was easy to see they were impatient to be off on their own.

The Marans were similarly disinterested in our other flocks. In fact, they seemed almost standoffish towards the other birds. It was almost like they were the privileged high-school populars.

Given that every other breed we were raising practically craved human attention, the Marans' independence was somewhat unsettling to me. After four years and multiple Marans generations, none of them producing those famously dark-chocolate eggs, I sold the entire flock to a neighboring farmer who was simply happy to have chickens that laid well and basically looked after themselves. 🐔

Ana Hotaling and her husband, Jae, own FMA Farms, a heritage-poultry farm in southeast Michigan.

Marans are famously associated with their deliciously dark, chocolate-brown eggs (below).





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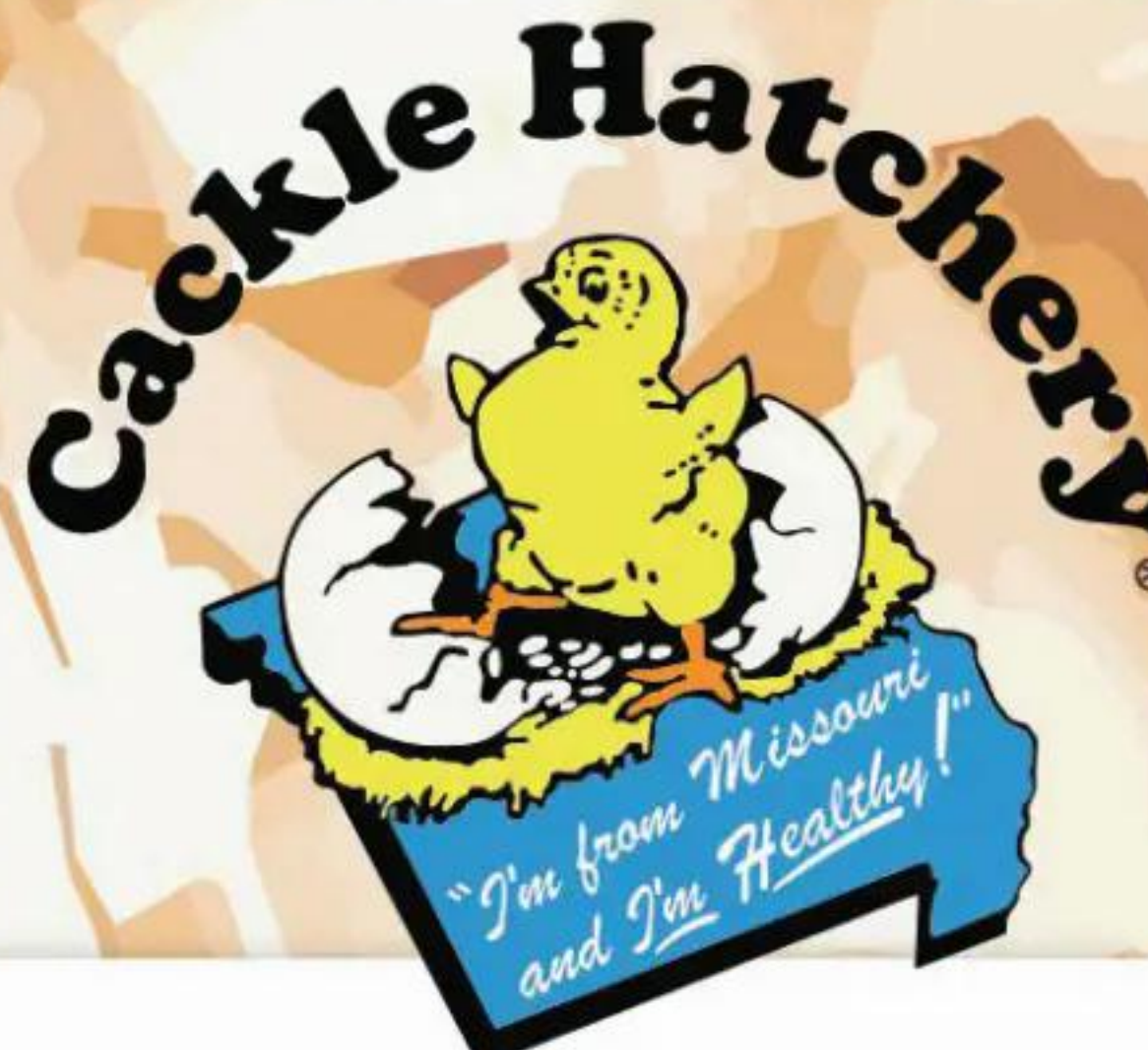
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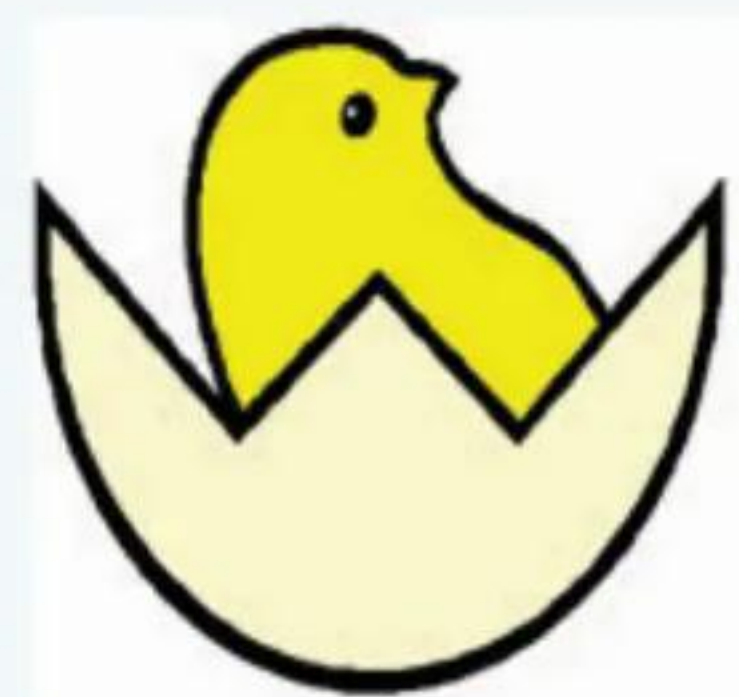


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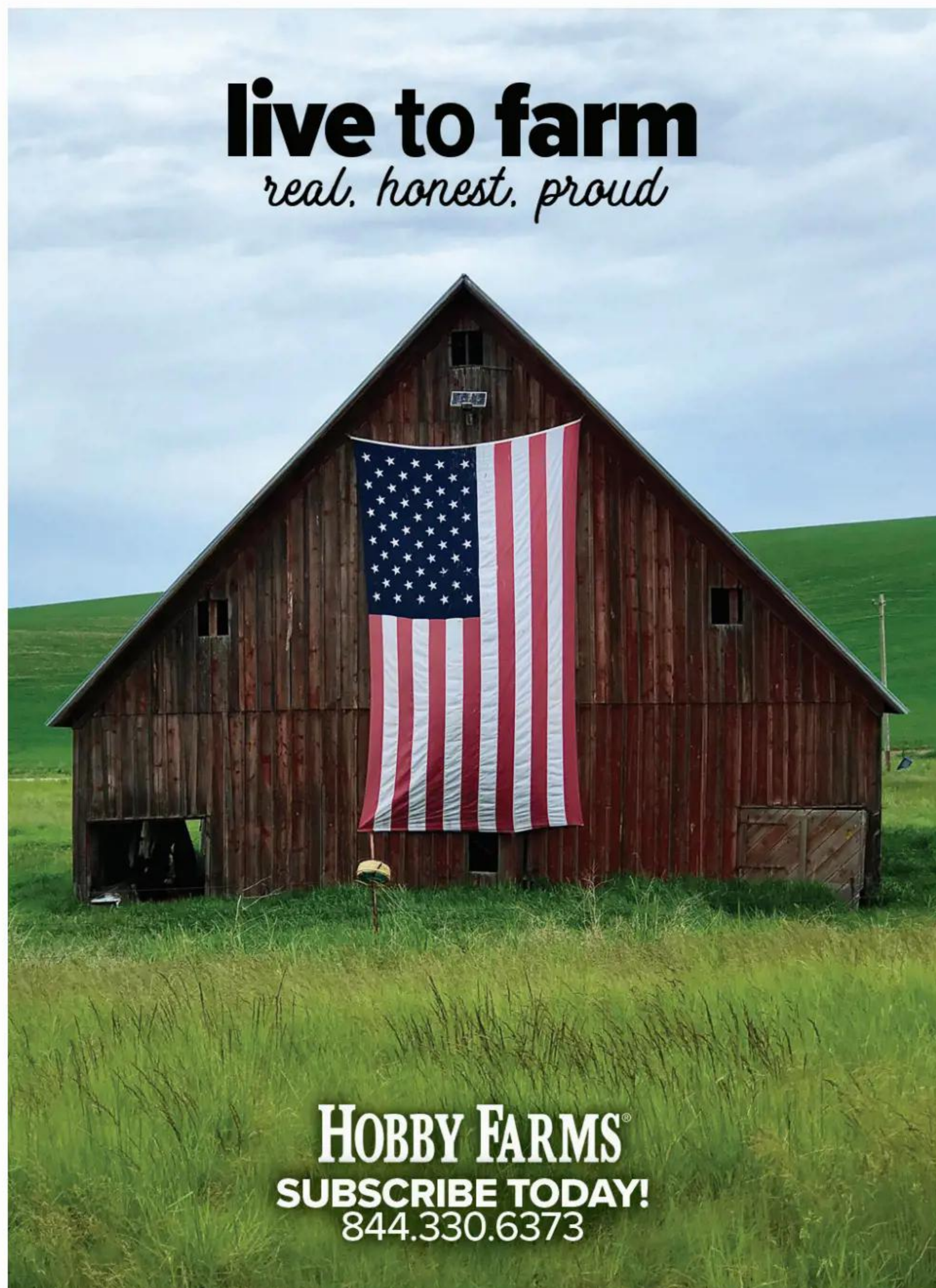
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Digestive Health

Health is defined as the absence of illness or injury. Things that affect our birds' health include bacterial or viral infections, scrapes and wounds, heat stress, nutritional imbalances, etc. The primary system within the body that works to maintain health is the immune system, although the digestive system and microbes that live within it play a key role. A couple of physiological indicators show how important the digestive system is to the overall health of a chicken. The first is the dynamic nature of the intestinal cells.

The primary role of the digestive tract is to digest and absorb nutrients necessary to keep our birds alive and thriving. The secondary, yet still mandatory role, is for the intestinal cells to maintain a barrier so feed and other items ingested don't enter the body and create illness.

To ensure the intestinal cells are at their optimal function, the body replaces them every couple of days. Even though birds have a relatively short digestive tract when compared to mammals, the intestinal tract is still the largest surface area in the body. This means their intestinal tract must maintain a barrier of the largest surface area in the body while still absorbing and digesting nutrients.

Plus, trillions of microbes live within the intestinal tract. Some of these microbes are good, some are bad and cause harm to our poultry, and some are neutral. These microbes play a vital role in helping with digestion and producing compounds that our intestinal cells can use. Much is still unknown about the microbiome. But its role likely goes beyond the intestinal tract.

The dynamic role of the intestinal cell, the large surface area and the trillion of microbes is part of the reason about 70% of the immune system is in the intestinal tract.

The digestive system is challenged daily with foreign invaders such as pathogens and allergens. So the presence of the immune system is essential.

The intestinal tract is also a place for the immune system to sample the environment to see what potential disease they could be challenged with.

So how can a chicken owner ensure digestive health for their birds?

1. FEED A GOOD QUALITY & BALANCED DIET. This is key to a healthy digestive tract. Factors that affect the quality of a diet include poor quality ingredients that have high amounts of undigestible nutrients, diets that aren't formulated properly, contamination with molds or high amounts of anti-nutritional compounds.

2. PROVIDE SUPPLEMENTS. Providing a high-quality, daily probiotic supplement provides a source of good bacteria. A higher population of good bacteria versus bad bacteria reduces the chances of getting sick.

3. WHEN POSSIBLE, REDUCE STRESS. Stress comes in different forms, and poultry are prone to it. Stressors such as heat stress or feed restriction can increase the level of their stress hormone, which affects the function of intestinal cells.

4. KEEP A CLEAN HENHOUSE. The cleaner the coop, the less risk a flock will ingest something harmful. As flock owners, we can't change the biological systems within our birds. What we can do is keep a watchful eye and implement beneficial and preventative practices to reduce the risk of injury, infections or stress. Supporting your chicken flock's digestive tracts will benefit their health and allow them to be better equipped to face any new challenges that come their way. 🐔 — Mikayla Baxter, Ph.D.

LAST *Squawk*

“Under proper management, pullets should come into production at around 20 weeks of age, and the flock should remain above 60% production to 80 weeks of age. After 80 weeks of age, it is best to molt the flock together if possible. Birds will take about 10 to 12 weeks to complete a molt and come back into production. Hens can be kept for multiple laying cycles. However, the hens will lay fewer eggs, are less efficient and will lay eggs for a shorter time with each additional cycle.”

— “MANAGEMENT REQUIREMENTS FOR LAYING FLOCKS,” PENNSTATE EXTENSION



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